



ROSE AND BANE

A DARK PARANORMAL BEAUTY AND THE BEAST RETELLING

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ROSE AND BANE

A DARK PARANORMAL BEAUTY AND THE BEAST RETELLING

A tale as old as time, but not as you remember it.

Reila Barnes has a habit of losing herself in books, not because she loves to read—although she *does* love to read—but because she’s searching for a long-lost piece of herself. Things happen around her that no one can explain. People in town look at her strangely, always muttering under their breath when she passes, but no one will tell her *why* she is shunned. Not even her mother and young brother.

Rejecting a marriage proposal from a handsome but cold-hearted man presents her with a startling bit of evidence to cling to: Reila is a witch.

Not only is Reila a witch, but she is the one responsible for putting the curse on Merek, the Prince of Bellmare, condemning him to his current beast form.

What happens when the *beast* needs to be saved from the *beauty*?

Reila must search for a way to break the curse she cast, though Prince Merek refuses her help and cannot trust her. The best thing she can do is commit to sharing his self-imposed exile by staying with him in his solitary castle, poring over books to find a solution—all the way to a happily-ever-after.

Will Reila find a way to break the curse? Will Prince Merek ever learn to trust Reila again? Or is the old saying “true love can conquer anything” just another fairy tale?



PROLOGUE



Once upon a time, in the Halsworthy Kingdom in the European Union, there lived a handsome young prince, beloved by all those around him. Or so he thought. Although he had everything he wanted—cash, jewels, women to warm his bed—he was discontented. Spoiled and a little unkind when it came to matters of the heart.

Until he met *her*.

She entranced him with her beauty and her wit, even though he suspected a coldness in her heart.

One night he vowed to make this beautiful woman his own. She professed she wanted no one but him, and he loved her wholeheartedly. But the prince was oblivious to the multitude of envious others coveting him for his title, his wealth, and his handsomeness. Many a plot was put into motion to separate the prince from his woman so that he might choose one of them instead. And when his beloved discovered this, when she saw what she wanted to see instead of the truth of the situation, her woman's sadness transformed into a wildfire of rage, of pain and despair, revealing her true nature as a witch, her power ruthless and vengeful.

The prince, aware at last of the machinations against him, attempted to apologize for his cluelessness, to make her understand, but it was too late. The curse was cast and as punishment she transformed him into a hideous monster to rival those of legend and myth. Her spell blanketing the entire castle and all who remained inside.

Anguished, the beast exiled himself inside his domain, ashamed of what he had become. And the curse, like all major uses of magic, extracted a heavy price from the spellcaster as well.

It also came with a possible solution.

The prince had until his twenty-fifth birthday to find and earn the love of a woman who would love him as he was. At the stroke of midnight, if love was true, then the spell would be broken. If not, then he would be cursed to remain a monster for the rest of his life.

Years passed, and he fell deeper and deeper into a state of utter despair, all hope lost. No woman would ever stoop so low as to love him as he was. A hideous creature. An almost mythical beast. Doomed by the spell to be hidden away forevermore.

Yet the enchantress, robbed of her memories as the cost of casting such a forceful spell, now knew nothing of her part in his decimation.

Now you know: The tale as old as time is a lie.

CHAPTER 1



I jerked awake, my hand clutching my throat and feeling a tightness in my chest that must surely herald a heart attack. One could only hope.

No such luck, I thought as my heart slowed and my breathing returned to normal. A heart attack, at least, would have put me out of my misery instead of enduring another day missing a vital piece of myself.

My memories.

Pushing long, curling strands of reddish-brown hair out of my eyes, I turned to the window and the sun creeping its way above the horizon. Dawn once more. Soon those rays would top the trees and turn everything they kissed into gilded beauty. The same way they did every morning without fail.

It was almost more than I could bear at this point. Groaning, I rolled onto my side.

I lounged for a few stolen moments longer before my morning routine took me through a shower, dressing, and making my bed. Still I arrived in the kitchen before my mother woke. The woman slept like the dead and nothing could rouse her until after nine, no matter what she had to do in the way of work.

The outline of a baby-blue sky showed through every window cut into the cottage's thin walls and shingled roof. A hovel by many standards, with creaking floor joists and rafters that were sunken in the center like a swaybacked old nag. Comfortable to me, yet a far cry from the opulence we'd once enjoyed when my father had been alive. Opulence I barely remembered except for the few tiny crumbs we'd managed to salvage through the eviction.

The elder Barneses kept those treasures locked away in a chest where no one could reach them, no doubt to protect my brother and me from the memories of all we'd lost.

Funny thing, though...I didn't remember much of anything. I didn't remember the money, or the grand manor house, or the land comprising the estate. And when my mother, Patricia, told me stories of our past, none of it rang true for me. When I searched my brain for a recollection outside of the last five years, I found nothing but emptiness, an endless space of black with but a few bright spots of color in the shape of my family.

Dressed for the day in trousers and a loose blouse that had seen better days, I settled on reading while I made breakfast, humming to myself and turning the pages with one hand. The movements were natural due to a lifetime of practice.

Or so I guessed.

I pushed the eggs around in a pan while the coffee maker hummed and chugged out a refreshing stream of black goodness that would be gone the moment Patricia woke. She had a terrible habit of finishing the entire pot before I had even poured

myself a cup.

But I loved her. It was just her, my brother, and I here to turn our lives around after my father died of typhus. Now, still at home at the tender age of twenty-four, I took it upon myself to take care of her.

Patricia had gotten too old to do much in the way of work, although trying to convince her to take it easy was harder than pulling teeth out of a grizzly bear's mouth, despite the arthritis in her knuckles. She refused to slow down, knowing we depended on her meager income from selling her paintings to keep us afloat.

I wanted to help out but I couldn't find a decent job. The only place in town that had been willing to hire me was the local library, and only part-time. I went in two afternoons a week to restock the shelves as long as I promised not to interact with the patrons. Even with the familiar and comforting hush of the library, it didn't stop people in town from stopping in to stare at me. To whisper under their breath saying God knew what about me.

And no one would tell me why.

It really made a girl want to get out of bed in the morning.

"I'm not worthless," I muttered to the eggs. They didn't respond, so I wasn't sure if they agreed or disagreed. Either or neither or both.

The stove's warmth soaked into my skin, allowing me to relax and my imagination to run wild. I flipped through the book's well-loved pages and left space for the slow-to-burn romance to lift my soul. To take me away from the dingy cottage and the sunlight trickling in through the dust-covered windows.

That kind of pleasure and hope one could only find in a book, I knew.

"Reila. Haven't you read that one twenty times already?"

Patricia's voice cut through the reading haze over the sizzle of the eggs. I smiled. "Yes, and the odds are good I'll read it twenty more times before I'm done with it." I trailed my thumb down the spine. One of my favorites, and one I'd been drawn to since first seeing it on the shelf of the bookstore all those years ago.

As if it would somehow help me find that missing piece of who I was, despite the fact nothing had helped yet. Nothing *ever* helped me fight back against the yawning blackness in my mind and heart. Memory loss, the village healer had confirmed, though she offered no remedy. The memories would either return on their own in due time or they wouldn't, and I should be grateful to remember my family at all. An entire chunk of my life gone in a snap.

And I didn't remember the snap, either.

"Well, watch out, or you're going to set fire to it." Patricia took a step forward and leaned over my shoulder, inhaling deeply. The strands of her too-long gray hair dipped low and might have caught fire if I hadn't nudged my mother back a step. "Needs more salt," she said.

"How do you always do that?" I laughed and grabbed the salt shaker from the counter, twisting the top until I'd given the eggs a generous helping. "You just sniff and you know what's missing."

Only when it came to food, sadly. Not when it came to reality, and certainly not when it came to her own health.

Patricia shrugged, her bony shoulders shifting the light-green fabric of her tunic. "It's a gift limited to breakfast food. And you're going to need way more than a few eggs if you want to sit down and eat with us. The way you're cooking those, there isn't going to be enough for the three of us. Thomas is a growing boy."

"We'll need to wake him up soon," I said.

"Let him sleep."

She settled at the kitchen table, relaxing, and I paused in my reading to glance over, to take in Patricia's features. A little pale, but nothing so bad I should worry. I had to keep careful stock of the woman these days, otherwise she was prone to losing herself in her mind. It left her little time to remember to eat, remember to drink enough water, or even to sleep. When she wasn't deep in her thoughts, she chose to throw herself into art. A no less detrimental hobby when it came to her health.

But she seemed fine today. My shoulders relaxed inch by inch.

I'd be lost without you.

"This is half a dozen eggs," I told her, pointing to the pan with my spatula. "How hungry are you?"

"Better get the rest out. I woke up *starving*."

Starving for her meant an egg or two and then she'd complain of a full stomach. My face settled into a frown but I said nothing about it.

"And earlier than usual, too. You normally don't show your face for another hour. What gives?" I asked.

"Had a nasty dream." Patricia shook her head, her swollen and twisted fingers hidden on her lap though I could see how she fidgeted. "It woke me up and these old bones refused to settle down again. You understand, I know."

We'd both grown used to *my* nightmares. How I woke in the middle of the night screaming, but with no recollection of what tore the sounds from me. They were part of the hole inside of my head and my heart. The hole that, no matter how hard I searched for answers or who I asked for clues, nothing could seem to fill.

"I know about those," I agreed. "No worries, Momma, I'll make more eggs for you. Might just throw some cream cheese in there, too, if you behave." I sent her a wink and crossed toward the fridge. "We all know Thomas can eat his weight in eggs anyway."

Patricia leaned back in her chair. "Cream cheese? I don't know what I did to deserve such indulgence."

Cream cheese was a luxury we didn't often have, but I had no good reason to wait for a special occasion.

"I must be in a good mood today," I teased. Though it felt good to keep myself busy with the cooking. Better than worrying. Better than trying to remember my own bad dreams from last night.

Farm-fresh eggs would have been preferred. I did well enough with the gardening, my herbs growing larger than any of the neighbors' under my gentle hand. But chickens... I had never been able to get the hang of farm animals. The best I could manage was a horse that seemed happy enough in the little makeshift stable toward the rear of our property.

I made do with the weekly farmer's market and let the chickens be someone else's problem. A farmer I would never be.

Balancing several more eggs in my hand, I brought the rest of the basket from the fridge to the countertop, studying the pan. "How many more are you thinking? We have to save some for dinner if you're going to make that quiche you promised us."

"Another four should do it, I'd think," Patricia stated, crossing one leg over the other. Her hands trembled when they reached to massage an apparent ache across her ankle and lower leg. But she didn't complain, so I assumed it was a trifling nuisance.

I allowed myself a moment to bask in the scene, the unique blend of scents in the air and the bitter aroma of dark coffee. Did I like to cook? I guess so, but even

more I enjoyed seeing Patricia and Thomas happy. Even when they laughed at me when I came across the blank spots in my memory.

"I was thinking," Patricia began, pushing herself up and reaching out for the pot of coffee before pouring a large cup of the stuff, "we should try to get you out of the house this week."

"What do you mean?" My lips pursed. "I'm always out of the house."

"You know what I mean. Out of the house and out of a *book*. Maybe get you in touch with some people your own age. It's past time for you to have a social life, Reila." She waggled her eyebrows for emphasis.

"Yeah, well, people my own age are overrated." The grumble I'd meant to keep to myself, but it came out anyway. I might not remember the townspeople well, apart from the last few years, but they sure remembered me. Remembered and laughed and kept their secrets close to the vest.

I'd turned the heat up too high in the pan. The eggs I already had in there suddenly crackled and burned. Sizzling away to nothing. Like the hole inside of me. If I could just—

"Reila!"

Patricia's exclamation resonated through the room just behind a fierce *crack*. When I looked down, the eggs in my hand had exploded. Along with the rest of the ones in the basket. Broken shells littered the countertop and floor, yolks and whites raining down.

I stared down at the gooey mess oozing between my fingertips, at a loss for words. My stomach sank. "I don't understand..."

Setting her coffee cup aside, my mother slowly crossed to me, grabbed a towel, and held it under my hand to take the shells. "I'm sorry," she said lightly. "I should have warned you that I dropped the basket yesterday. Some of them must have taken more damage than I thought. That's why they broke so easily."

She laughed it off like it was nothing. As though there was no need to worry over a few broken eggs. Without her saying more, I knew. It hadn't been an accident.

Something had surged inside of me. A whip of anger, frustration, manifesting into physical force. But that kind of thing was impossible. Wasn't it?

"I would have noticed if they were cracked," I murmured, more to myself than to her. "Maybe I squeezed them too hard..."

"Think nothing of it," Patricia urged. "But you're going to have to go to the market to get more. Otherwise I won't be able to make my famous quiche for dinner. We have leftover ham in the freezer that needs to be used up but we're going to need more eggs from the store. Okay?"

Thomas entered the kitchen with a yawn, rubbing his eyes, his red-gold hair sticking out at all angles. "What's burning?" he muttered.

My sweet brother, only eight years old and with the whole world ahead of him. He didn't need to know about my worries. "It's nothing, honey," I reassured him.

My eyes fell on the mess in the basket for a moment longer before the smoke from the pan had me shaking off the odd sensation between my shoulder blades. *Excuses*. Everything my mother said was an excuse.

I knew she hadn't dropped the basket.

But I smiled at her and my brother anyway, flipping off the burner and pushing those dark thoughts aside for another day, another time. "It's no problem getting more eggs, Momma. I'll head out in a bit. It's not like I have anything else to do today. Thomas, sit down so you can eat your breakfast. I'll scrape away the burned bits. You won't even taste them."

Patricia's own smile turned sad as she bent down with towel in hand, wiping at the spread of broken yolks on the floor with a barely concealed wince of pain.

I did that.

Not the pain from arthritis, but the eggs. The explosion.

I'd done other things, too, things Patricia had been just as hasty to write off as accidents. Like the time I'd caught my shirt on fire although I hadn't been standing anywhere near the stove. Or the time I spilled milk on the counter and when I went to clean it up, it trailed off into the sink though no one had touched it.

"Aren't you going to stay and eat with me?" Thomas asked as I set his plate down in front of him.

"I can't today, kiddo, I've got to run. Tomorrow, I promise." Forced normalcy had me reaching out to pat him on the shoulder the way I always did, hoping he didn't see the way my fingers trembled.

I grabbed my book on the way out the door and didn't look back.

Sick. I felt sick and I had no way to combat the swelling nausea. What had I done to those eggs? *How* had I done it?

And why was my mother so quick to turn a blind eye and offer an excuse?

While it was still early in the morning, the sun burned down bright overhead, waves of heat shimmering above the sidewalk. We were in for a blistering hot August by all accounts.

I clasped the book in my hand and drew in a deep breath. The scents of summer, the air saturated with heat and life. Renewal even as the months marched steadily toward autumn.

My favorite time of year.

I think.

It was as if I was a partially finished painting, with some areas filled in and the rest left showing the plain white canvas beneath. No one wanted to help me with the unfinished bits.

The steps to the market were memorized and allowed me to keep reading instead of watching where I was going. I knew where I was going. Nothing ever changed. My eyes devoured lines of black print inside my book. I knew the book, too. Knew it well. Maybe I should ignore the familiar plot and look for hidden clues. Who knew, maybe there were answers between the lines. In the spaces between words. Hints and clues that only I could see and interpret.

Yeah, sure.

But I needed something to get my mind off of the eggs Patricia had insisted she'd clean up. If she wanted me out of the house, then I would oblige. And apparently that's exactly what she'd wanted.

Her comment on meeting people my own age had hurt, though.

No one my age chose to associate with me. I carried a stigma unknown to me, an invisible stigma no one bothered to tell me of but insisted on nonetheless. No wonder I'd rather lose myself in a book, in a story. Because fiction was infinitely kinder than reality.

I would never tell my mother that I recognized her subterfuge, the way she kept me in the dark. Not with outright lies. Never lies. But I knew when she spun a tale around me. I could hear what she *didn't* say as well.

Just as I heard them speaking about me even now as I walked down the street. Those subtle whispers from the people I passed on the sidewalk.

There goes Reila Barnes. What a strange woman.

Have you ever seen a weirder person? She rarely leaves the house. Her mother keeps her at home because she knows how crazy the girl is.

Odd things happen around her; I hear.

You'd better not get too close. There's something not quite right about her...

Yeah, crazy. Strange. Odd. Not quite right. I'd rather they think me crazy. It was nothing compared to what I thought about myself. Odd things *did* happen around me. Like the eggs breaking today, or the time I'd grabbed a hot cup of coffee only to find it frozen over moments later.

Perfectly normal abnormalities, Patricia had told me, with their own logical explanations. And the funny thing is...I had no choice but to accept that, because *I couldn't remember enough to make that judgment call myself.*

I pushed the undertones about me aside and refused to listen to them any longer. They did nothing to help me. They did nothing except bring my attention to the things I already knew about myself.

For instance that I wasn't like other people.

The town of Bellmare in the Halsworthy Kingdom was its own little slice of paradise, and I stood out as a whisper on the lips of the townsfolk more than anyone else. It didn't matter that my mother sold her art to galleries and on the street during the market days, nor that she had stood as a pillar of this community since she'd moved here decades ago.

Once she'd been a nomadic traveler, blowing wherever the wind took her. She'd often regaled me with stories of the places she'd seen and the people she'd met, the scenes she'd painted before she decided to settle down and start a family. But those days were long gone. Even after her merchant husband, my father, died, Patricia had never regained her momentum again. And whatever drive she'd had to travel had disappeared.

I wondered if my passion for escaping into books was some version of wanderlust I'd inherited from her. The words on the pages called to me, the images conjured in my mind cementing a connection between this world and that. Like now, even doing something as simple as walking a path I'd walked countless times, I was here but not here. Ignoring the whispers and stares, I went back to that world which was so much more appealing to me than this one ever—

“Hey, watch where you're going!”

I glanced up just in time to see a muscled chest directly in my path. My sneakers skidded to such an abrupt stop my balance was upset and I went down hard on my tailbone. A smile I did not trust in a face I dreaded to see loomed above me.

CHAPTER 2



Gray Matthews did not help me up. In fact, he just stood there, towering over me, his smile growing into an unpleasant sneer as he stared.

"You need to watch where you're going. You can't just run into people and then expect them to help you," he said, brushing the front of his blazer to make sure there were no spots of dirt to ruin his immaculate image.

I stifled a groan. "Thank you for the advice, *Mr.* Matthews. I'll take it under consideration."

Gray was the type of guy to idly meddle where he wasn't wanted on the *best* of occasions. The kind who believed the world owed him whatever he wanted because of his natural good looks and charisma. On the worst of occasions, well, he asserted himself with the tenacity of a pig hunting truffles in the woods.

Especially when it came to women he considered worthy of his attention. And sadly, for the last year, I'd been his target.

He was tall and good-looking, with clothes perfectly tailored and much finer than anything I might have worn in my life. At least, my life now.

His eyes grew wide, as if he'd only just now recognized me. But I wasn't fooled. "Well, well, Reila Barnes. What are you doing outside on this fine day? With your nose in a book, no less," he cooed.

His sly smile was a look I recognized all too well: he thought he'd captured me.

With a sigh, I pushed myself upright, trying to overcome the urge to slap the smile right off of his handsome, disgusting face.

"It's nice to see you too, Gray. As usual," I said with forced cheer. "And thanks for lending me a hand there. I really appreciate it."

I inhaled, urging my insides to calm. Sarcasm and irony were lost on him. *Lord, give me the strength to let him walk away...*

I wouldn't do anything bad to him. Not really. But damn, whatever semblance of peace I'd fought for after the egg incident immediately evaporated in a haze of frustration.

I rubbed the tender skin on my rump and tried to ignore what was sure to develop into a splitting headache if I wasted any more time with Gray.

"Honestly, Reila, if you spend much more of your time with books then you're going to forget how to live." He flashed me a charming wink. Or surely what he *thought* to be charming. "You need to get out more. Your skin is so pale. Almost translucent. Beautiful, of course, but a nice golden glow would complement your hair to perfection."

"Well, I'm out right now, and I have to say I'm not really enjoying the view." Anger welled up inside of me and I flicked my hair over my shoulder. "Now if you'll excuse me, Gray, I have places to be and people to see that don't involve you."

I was on my way to the market.”

Handsome, yes. One of the better-looking men in the kingdom, with rich dark locks that curled over slanted amber eyes. He stood taller than most, with shoulders wide enough to block out the sun. Now they bumped against mine as Gray fell into step beside me. Obviously not deterred.

And there went any thought of escape, I thought with a sigh. He kept his body solidly between me and the street, with buildings at my other side. I could make a break for it but odds were good that with his long, muscled legs he’d catch up to me in no time.

Besides, it wouldn’t look good for the crazy woman to sprint away from the town golden boy without provocation.

“Off to go buy more books, is what I’m sure you mean,” he said easily, slinking along beside me wearing a sneer.

I pointedly ignored the way his elbow tapped against my arm, his shoulder bumping mine occasionally. “I can see how you feel about literature. I have to say, your opinions aren’t impressing me much.”

And although he didn’t subscribe to any of the gossip surrounding me—too dense to do more than focus on my face, apparently—I didn’t have time for him or his overt come-ons.

“I read,” Gray insisted almost petulantly.

“Picture books don’t count.”

“Come now. Don’t be like that.” His chastisement skittered along my spine and despite the heat, I shivered. “There’s no need to insult me when I only want to make conversation with you. Let me see what you have there and I’ll give you my honest opinion on it.”

Gray snatched the book out of my hand.

I started, surprised that I hadn’t seen him move. “Hey! Give that back to me.”

Amiable and appealing? Did most of the women in the town think him such? They were mistaken. Although I had always struggled to see the best in him, in anyone—I think—more often than not I found his outgoing disposition to be nothing but a mask for his inner demons. Everyone had them in some form or other. Gray, instead of dealing with his, traded on smarm and charm to get his way.

He also came from a wealthy family who had invested more in Bellmare than any other locals had. To the Matthews clan, that bought them certain privileges, including big-boy toys and status and women for their son.

“You are too busy to have fun because you’ve always got your nose in a book, pushing away people who actually care about you,” he scolded.

Any hint of guilt I’d felt about being rude to him vanished. Especially considering how he held my book just out of reach. Toying with me. I didn’t bother hiding my annoyance now, squaring my shoulders.

“*Care* about me? You can’t mean yourself.” I didn’t doubt the sincerity of his words, despite how delusional they sounded to me. Gray honestly believed what he said. “You really are crazy.”

“I’m not crazy. I’m in love,” Gray insisted. He flashed me a smile I’m sure must have cut more than one woman off at the knees. A regular lothario. “You have to know how I feel about you. You are the prettiest girl in town, no matter what everyone says about you.”

I spun toward him, reaching out to retrieve the book when he held it just out of reach. “Come on, cut it out. Give me the book back.”

He was the town playboy. The one no woman could resist, or so he told himself. Told countless others, too, if I chose to believe the rumors about Gray. I would not

have given the gossipmongers a second thought if I hadn't seen his behavior for myself.

The Beau of Bellmare.

He refused to take *no* for an answer.

Gray believed that everyone loved him, and would jump at the snap of his fingers. Sadly, that included me as well. He'd been hot on my heels since...well, ever since I could remember.

He held an arm out in front of him to keep me at bay, a flesh and blood barrier. "Why? You object to me telling you how I feel about you?"

Unease settled in my gut and I hesitated for a brief moment before saying, "I object to you stealing my book and continuing to harass me. We all know you want nothing more from me than a quick tumble, and I refuse to give in. You just love the chase. Now give me back my book."

As before, my plea fell on deaf ears. "Tell you what. I'm going to come by later. I need to talk to you about something important," Gray told me with an unsettling smirk, his tone full of mock politeness. "I'll give you back your book but you have to invite me in for dinner."

My hands froze in mid-motion and the blood in my veins turned to ice.

To strike a bargain with a man like Gray? The audacity sent a wave of cold surging through me. I would rather kneel naked on my knees in the street than agree to anything he said.

"No, I'm busy. Sorry." I kept a purposely blank face and thrust my hand forward in a final attempt to grab my book back.

Gray drew away, baiting me. "Tomorrow, then. Six o'clock."

"I'll promise to let you stay on the porch, but you're not coming inside and you are certainly not dining with me or my family," I replied. "Give it back to me. *Now*." I jumped up in a final attempt to grab the book.

Gray eyed me up and down as though I were a piece of merchandise he wanted to inspect before purchasing. "Fine. I know I'll convince you one way or another. Tomorrow at six, Reila. It's important."

He shrugged and tossed the book toward me, but it landed near the sewer opening. I scrambled to grab it, to save my treasure, only to find the balance tipped and the book slipped between the grates and into the murky water below. "No!"

I didn't care what he thought of me then, could only imagine what he thought as I bent down and reached through, twisting my wrist, though the book remained just out of reach. Rocking back on my heels, I sadly watched the pages swell with water.

I'd just lost my favorite place to hide.

When I glared back up at Gray, he gave a final twitch of his upper lip, adjusted his cuffs, dipped his head in farewell, and walked away. "Tomorrow."

I could have killed him on the spot.



It took longer than I liked to go to the market and grab the eggs my mother wanted. Afterward, I wandered the walkways of downtown in contemplation. This part of Bellmare held more charm than the outskirts, where my family shared a cottage barely bigger than a shed.

The storefronts gave way to manicured patches of grass and driveways made to resemble cobblestone streets. Some of the locals called Bellmare "Little France" after the old country, and we certainly acted as though we were a sovereign

kingdom of our own.

But France, like all other countries in the European Union, had dissolved its borders after the last civil war. Small kingdoms redefined themselves under the hands of anyone strong enough to hold them, so long as they all answered to the parliament of the European Union.

Although born here, I couldn't say I felt perfectly at home in Bellmare, but I knew the streets like I knew my own reflection. I could maneuver without misstep even with my nose buried in a book. And that meant something to me. It was a hard-won stability.

I dodged couples walking along the street with eyes only for each other, then paused mid-stride to stare at one of them. Wizen and wrinkled, their hands clasped together as they held each other tightly. The man leaned in close and whispered something to his sweetheart. Her giggles carried on the wind. Gentle, joyful.

With a wistful sigh, I turned back toward town and the path home. The clamor intensified the closer I got to the storefronts, where trades set up shop and owners called out their wares.

"Fresh bread!"

I followed my nose toward the scent of baking dough and butter. The townsfolk had risen early to prepare for the bustle of Saturday, waiting on and greeting usual clientele and tourists alike.

"Fresh—oh, Reila. I didn't realize it was you."

Allen, who owned the local bakery, had wheeled a sign out to set in front of the shop window. He took a step in the opposite direction when he saw me. A white apron covered his portly belly, flour dotting his hands. The smile he sent me was genuine, but it didn't completely erase the wariness I always sensed when the two of us interacted.

I returned the smile and accompanied it with a small enthusiastic wave. "Good morning. How are you?"

"No time for complaints." Allen looked down his nose at me. "Can I interest you in a loaf of six-grain sprouted? Just came out of the oven and I'm running a special."

I pushed an uneasy niggling sensation out of my mind at the way Allen watched me. The way he held his shoulders back and straight with his knees bent, legs tensed to run in the opposite direction. I had never done anything to the man to make him act in such a way. If I had, I didn't remember, and no one bothered to tell me.

"No, thanks. I have a busy schedule today." A lie. But Allen didn't need to know that.

He said a brief goodbye and added well wishes for my mother and Thomas before leaving the sign where it sat, returning to the warm and steaming ovens with their delicious scents.

I didn't understand his apprehension. Not that he was alone in it. Many others shared his feelings. There were several people in town with whom I interacted on a regular basis who still would not look me in the eye. Oh, they made polite conversation, enough to get away with the bare minimum of courtesy, but when my back was turned...I knew how people felt about me.

I just didn't know why.

With a sigh, I adjusted the reusable bag on my arm with the precious eggs inside, continuing down the path toward home. Years ago, my vagabond mother had chosen this place to land, saying it looked like something out of a fairy tale. She fell

in love with my father, a local merchant, and when my brother and I came along, our family life together had seemed like a fairy tale too.

Although there was such a huge mysterious void in my memories, family was always there. I had never forgotten any of the beautiful words and stories spun from my father's voice in the dark nights of my youth. Those stories, those memories had embedded themselves in my heart and fostered my love of reading.

But the desire for a happy ending, for true love's kiss...those kinds of things remained relegated to fiction.

As a grown woman, I knew to embrace my childlike enthusiasm in a number of ways, like finding joy in the small things. But believing in make-believe? Those were just fancies and follies. I refused to be seduced by silly romances that were too perfect to be real.

After arriving home, I settled myself on the bench near the window in my bedroom, my knees tucked up under my chin. The book I'd grabbed from the shelf lay open and forgotten at my side as the sun disappeared beneath a dark cloud, shadowing the world.

Patricia whistled downstairs, her tune traveling up the stairwell. A smile curved my lips. She'd leave me alone, I knew, because once I retreated to the sanctity of my bedroom, it was as good as a caution sign. My own world, my own space. And she respected that.

A twist of my finger had the soft gray feather, the one I used as a bookmark, floating up to my eye level on an invisible breeze. Floating by itself.

I could do that. Was it magic? Was it some kind of freak genetic trait?

What was I?

And why could I do these things that no one else could?

CHAPTER 3



Night had come and gone, though morning brought no further clarity to my life crisis. What it did bring, however, was a breaking point I could no longer ignore.

"I know you haven't been feeling well, and denying it is nothing but a lie." I shot Patricia my patented death glare. The one that brooked no argument, no matter how many times she tried.

My mother raised a hand to her head, scratching until those gray strands stood at wild angles. "I'm not lying to you," she insisted. "I feel fine. Well enough that I don't have to go see some quack doctor to tell me how to live my life."

"And what about your arthritis?"

"I have a handle on it."

I shook my head. "Your handle on it involves pushing it under the rug and pretending it doesn't exist. You aren't well, and instead of letting me help you, you...what? You turn a blind eye," I said.

The woman was infuriating, no question about it. She refused to take her health concerns seriously.

"Whenever I leave for *any* period of time, you seem determined to run yourself into the ground. Today I was only gone for a couple of hours and I come back to see you hacking your lungs out." I eyed the cigar stub with distaste and inhaled a calming breath. Or tried to, anyway. "Are we never going to talk about your death wish? Or why you'd rather keep Thomas and me in the dark?"

If she keeps it quiet, then it doesn't exist. What healthy coping mechanisms she teaches.

Patricia's brows drew together in a glower. "I'm allowed to smoke in my own home. I won't have you taking away the one joy I have left."

My hands went to my hips. "I like that. The *one* joy you have left. Because let's not forget all there is to live for. Say, a son and daughter who love you? Who want you to live to see grandchildren one day, maybe?"

I had walked up to the front of our cottage after working at the library and noticed the smoke immediately. Not so much a plume in the air, but the sensation of pleasure. Of guilt. The two went hand in hand whenever I caught Patricia doing something she knew she should not be doing. I pinched my nose as I pushed through the door.

Patricia had tried to cover up the evidence of the smoking but nothing got past me. I sniffed out the burnt stub and dragged it out of the garbage can, with my stomach churning into queasy knots.

"Leave me alone," Patricia argued. She crossed one leg over the other with a grunt of pain. "I get my painting done, don't I? I bring in cash to put food on the

table, don't I?"

"Lung cancer is no joke." I hung my head. "If you aren't willing to talk about how you're trying to join the others beyond the grave, then I will. You've got one foot in the dirt already and the greasy food and secret cigar smoking isn't helping matters."

Blood drained from Patricia's face, and the despair my words caused were like a knife to the heart. How I wished I could take them back in an instant.

"Reila, after everything I've done...*give me this*. I don't want to hear another word about it."

The longer she watched me, the more I saw her eyes fill with cold detachment. Eyes that scrutinized. They saw everything, and my fear for her turned to annoyance. To anger.

"You want me to ignore this when you won't even tell me what I am?" I snapped back. My hands went to my hips and I prepared to dig in for the long haul.

A knock interrupted us and had me stopping dead in my tracks.

"Oh my God. What time is it?" I asked, then rushed for the door without waiting for an answer.

Six o'clock. Which meant Gray had come to call on me.

Dear baby Jesus, not now.

I didn't have the mental fortitude to deal with whatever he wished to say, so I had to find a way to get rid of him. One that wouldn't involve him filling the townspeople's ears with more rumors about me.

"Don't think I'm done dealing with you." I called the warning over my shoulder, accompanied with a serious finger point at my mother. "We are going to continue this as soon as I get rid of him."

"Him who? Expecting company?" she threw back.

"Nothing I can't handle. We are not through with our conversation, Momma."

Patricia waved me away as though she weren't concerned about me booting off a potential marriage prospect. She'd already deemed me unsuitable for the institution. "Do whatever you want. I didn't expect this to turn into an interrogation."

I frowned. "You never do."

Gathering my courage, I headed for the front door and the man I knew stood there waiting for me. The bell rang once, twice, three times even as I crossed the floor. And when I pulled open the door, inhaling a rigid breath, there stood Gray.

The smile on his face hit me hard. He returned my stare and leaned against the aging railing, the rotting wood miraculously holding his weight.

My heart quickened at the sight of him, and not in a good way. But why would I care what this man thought of me? A man of little honor, who delighted in flirting with whatever attractive female crossed his path simply because he could.

His nostrils flared and his eyes narrowed, taking me in. "Good evening, Miss Barnes."

Gray's deep voice gave me a start, my focus on the desire to bolt.

"Mr. Matthews. You're right on time," I told him. I stiffened with each step he took toward me, and instinctively moved to bump my rear against the doorjamb because I was the only one blocking him from coming in. "What can I do for you?"

For the first time in a long time, I wished for a friend. A buffer whom I could call on for strength, for balance. For an excuse to not talk to Gray when he clearly wanted to.

His smile displayed straight white teeth. A smile designed to charm the pants off of any girl who came within a twenty-foot radius of him. Bright blue eyes flashed

and caught the light of the afternoon sun before sliding down my body in a leisurely perusal.

“Reila.” I hated the way he said my name. “How is it that you look even more beautiful now than you did before?”

I vowed to remain rooted in place as he continued to smile at me.

“Thank you for the compliment. I appreciate the kind words. Now tell me what can I do for you?” I struggled to find the power in my voice. Since when did *I* struggle with such things? The worry for my mother must have affected me more than I initially thought.

He leaned toward me and his breath singed my bare skin. “We have serious business to discuss, you and I,” Gray replied, his tone languid as he rotated his head to take me in, an amused groan low in his throat.

“I’m not sure why.” It took monumental effort to keep the irritation out of my tone. “Didn’t we say everything we needed to yesterday? I can’t imagine there would be anything left to speak about, unless you’d like to compensate me for the book you tossed in the sewer.”

For a moment, Gray had no response for me. I withstood his scrutiny too long before looking away, my skin crawling. *Please don’t let him touch me. Please don’t let him touch me.* Something about his nearness did terrible things to me. Literally terrible things. But Gray loved toying with me, gave no thought to my resistance to his amorous attention.

“I’d like to come inside now,” he stated. “The nights get awfully cold lately and I would hate to catch a chill simply because you forgot your manners. The polite thing to do is offer me tea.”

“I told you that I didn’t want you coming into the house.” I didn’t want him any closer to my mother. Gray held nothing but disdain for Patricia Barnes. For our entire family. Which begged the question...

Why was Gray so set on me?

“And *I* told you that I had something very important to discuss with you.”

“Gray...” I trailed off, attention splintered. Why was he doing this? “Now is really not the best time. We were in the middle of a family discussion.”

He lurched toward me and grabbed my hand. Leaned forward to place his lips on my knuckles. “There’s no better time than the present. I’m trying to ask you to marry me. To join with me and let me make you the most powerful woman in Bellmare. In the entire kingdom of Halsworthy, if you will. Reila Barnes, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

I jerked in surprise and broke his hold on me, nearly closing the door on the fingers he had wrapped around the door jamb. My head snapped up. “What did you say?”

Gray blinked, taking a second to digest the tactless exclamation. “I want to marry you, Reila. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. With you at my side, there is nothing we can’t accomplish together. We would be the ultimate power couple.”

It sounded more of a demand than a proposal. A statement that I should feel lucky to have him as my husband. I fought to retain even some semblance of composure. And could do nothing to fight the quiver in my voice, or the disdain.

“But...but the people in town. They hate me.”

“There is a very fine line, sweet one, between hate and fear,” he stated.

His words hit me like a punch to the kidney even as his arms crept toward me again. Wanting my body, wanting everything I had to offer in a way I wasn’t willing to give him.

I could imagine the horror of my life if I said yes to Gray, yes to becoming Mrs. Matthews.

"Reila, look at me." His tone told me he expected to be obeyed. He'd gotten down on one knee. "You are a jewel in a sea of coal, shining brighter than any of the others even in your current condition. Marry me and rise to the heights you were meant to. I will not let you slip away," he said. "You were meant for more than this. Your power, my power. Your beauty, my good looks. It is a perfect combination."

And I heard what he didn't say in that moment.

I want to possess you.

"You...you don't even know me," I burst out. I kept my fists at my sides, staring down at him, trying not to let him see how I really felt. "How could you want to marry someone you don't know? Just because I have a pretty face? There are other pretty faces in town, ones with a more amiable heart and a willing disposition. Try with any of them. Because you won't get an agreement from me. I'm not powerful. I'm *no one*."

"What of my affection for you?"

If any of the girls in town heard my refusal, they would have thought me madder than I already was. But Gray's lines...I would not accept them. I would not take them for anything but what they were. His fingertips skimmed over my fisted hand to draw my attention back.

I jerked away from his touch. "*Stop.*" My response came as a low but firm whisper, frustration rising and burning me as I stared daggers down at him.

Cool it down or you will scorch the walls of this cottage.

Gray straightened slowly and stood, brushing off the knees of his straight black pants and fixing me with a sneer when he stood to full height. "You have a lot of nerve rejecting me like this," he said. "Considering your past. And here you stare at me like I am the one to be pitied. It's beneath you, Reila."

I'd never really cared for him enough to remain politically correct now. Not when he stalked closer to me, his fingers nudging at my arms as though to shake some sense into me. Too close for his own good.

"What are you saying? I didn't get the chance to reject you. I'm still trying to process the shock of you proposing to me. The whole town thinks I'm crazy, no one wants to speak to me, and you...you're the golden boy. What could you possibly want with someone like *me*?"

I bit out the last question, genuinely wanting an answer. There was so much I wanted to say to him, so many things I had held inside, not only when it came to Gray but with everyone. At once his presence was unbearable.

He took a step closer yet and if I hadn't been so keenly aware of him, I might have missed the way his hand rose. To touch me or slap some sense into me, I didn't know. "You can't talk to me like this, Reila. Do you have any idea who I am? What I could do to you and your family if you cross me the wrong way?"

He said the words as though he were a savior, doing a good deed, rescuing me from my fate, and in the moment I felt certain he would hit me if I continued to resist.

I blinked. "Are you actually threatening me and my family?"

"I suppose I should have expected this from you," Gray finally said. Disgusted. "After what you did five years ago, I should have expected you to be nasty about this."

Like that, my stomach dropped, his words cutting yet ringing with unshakeable truth. "Hold on. What are you talking about?"

"Guess you're not as easy as you used to be. That whole thing with Merek must have drastically changed you."

I battled the urge to react, instead fixing my eyes on the buttons of his shirt. The perfectly tailored clothing. "Who is Merek?" I asked him on a shaky breath.

"Merek Lyndon? *Prince* Merek Lyndon?" His words sounded bitter. "Don't tell me you've really forgotten the poor man you cursed. All this time I thought you were playing dumb because you couldn't bear the guilt." He tilted his head to the side. "Maybe not. Maybe it isn't an act."

"Gray, please." I lunged at him to grab hold of his suit jacket before he could turn and leave. He had answers, and my mind clung desperately to the small ray of hope those answers may offer. If I could get him to speak to me. "I don't understand. What does this Prince Merek have to do with me?"

He stared at my hand until I let go. "You cursed him. You turned him into a beast. Like a real bitch, Reila. Like you were somehow better than the rest of us."

"What are you saying?" I asked, shaken.

Gray's cheeks turned pink, then red with the effort of his barely restrained tirade. His composure unraveled finally, the genial facade he usually showed to the world slipping away. "I thought we'd moved past the whole situation, since it's been, what, five years? But apparently you're still just the same nasty woman who wants to hurt people simply because you can. Watch the tails you pull, sweet one, because *this* lion will not hesitate to turn on you."

I grasped the sides of my head, an ache spreading between my temples and pulsing in time with my heart. The longer he spoke, the more the ache grew. The empty pit inside of me yawned wider. "I don't know what you mean—"

Gray scoffed, wrinkling his nose, his voice full of disdain as he cut me off. "Sure you don't. The same way you don't *know* why people in town talk about you like you're crazy. It's because you are. A crazy *witch*." He shook his head and straightened his waistcoat, still immaculate. "I'm sorry I came here today. I truly am. You're obviously not in the right mood for any kind of serious discussion."

He swept off the porch with stomping feet causing dust to fall from the rafters. I held onto the doorjamb to keep from falling and my pulse echoed in my ears, gaining speed by the second. I couldn't think. Couldn't stand. Could only watch Gray as he stalked down the road, with the small crowd of people gathered on the sidewalk parting to make way for him, the smug grin finally wiped off his face after he dropped a bomb on me.

The crowd then turned back toward the cottage with a combination of curiosity and disdain. The same combination I received daily and only now understood why, in part.

A curse? A prince? What the hell had Gray been talking about? I didn't remember anything about a curse. Or a prince.

My fingers trembled, my knees turned to jelly, the wind picked up, blowing leaves and debris around the yard. "Get out of here!" I yelled at the crowd. "Stop staring at me! Go on, go away!"

The howling wind took on a mind of its own and a ferocious gust knocked a tree limb down from the large silver maple in the front yard. The resulting crash did the trick and the men and women scattered.

My mind fractured in a thousand different directions and none of them made any sense. Shock and confusion had my nerves thrumming. *Prince. Curse.*

I had wanted answers, hadn't I? *Be careful what you wish for.*

CHAPTER 4



I clung to the door until the wind died down and the floor steadied underneath my feet. Feeling untethered, I could only fight to draw air into my lungs when it felt like the world had changed around me.

A witch...

A curse?

Gray must be mistaken. He must have said whatever first popped into his mind to hurt me, because I would have remembered having that kind of magic, that kind of power. I certainly would have remembered a freakin' prince. Right?

Someone I might have hurt, although I had no memory of such a thing. What had I done? *What have I done?*

And when?

My head spun. "Mom? Momma!" I called out, stumbling as a gusty breeze, filled with magic, slammed the door closed behind me.

Magic.

Gasping, I tripped and went down hard on my rear, the same bruised spot from yesterday aching when I landed on it a second time. I scrambled to rise. The floorboards creaked as I ran into the kitchen, my mother swinging around to face me, with pale features.

"What's the matter?" she asked, eyes narrowing, wrinkled lips drawn in a straight line. Like she hadn't been eavesdropping on the conversation. Like she hadn't heard everything Gray said to me, and everything he had not.

I slammed a hand down on the nearest flat surface to stop her from speaking again before she could give me nothing but hastily fabricated excuses. The same ones she'd been giving me to explain the abnormalities and the gap in my memories for the last few years.

"Tell me why it is that *Gray Matthews*, who just proposed to me by the way, told me that I am the one who apparently cursed some poor man to become a beast?" His face flashed in my mind's eye and I trembled. My fingers curled, knuckles turning white. "A *beast*, okay? If he's correct, then how would *I* have the power?"

Patricia's eyes cast to the side to avoid mine. I expected as much but the shock still hurt. "Reila—"

"And don't try to bullshit me again, because it's time I got an explanation." I paused long enough to wipe my eyes against the burning there. "You owe it to me and I'm not going to leave you alone until I get it. Is it true? And if it is, why would I curse a man? *How?*"

My mother gestured toward the living room and the threadbare gold-fabric sofa which had permanent dimples where we'd sat for too long in the same places on the

worn cushions. "Okay," she said softly. "Okay, I'll tell you. But we need to be quiet so Thomas doesn't overhear. He's up in his room finishing up one of his school projects and he won't understand. He...was too young to comprehend the severity of what happened."

Already I'd started to snifle, and wiped my nose with the back of my hand. Why couldn't I control these emotions? They surged out of nowhere in a commanding wave I could only endure and do nothing to prepare against, to fight against. Yet the wave refused to crack open the door to my memories despite its strength.

"What happened?" I asked.

Patricia joined me on the couch, although she made sure to keep her distance and keep one eye on the door like she might make a run for it at any time if I didn't appreciate whatever she had to say.

Was I such a terrible person that my own mother may need to run from me?

Fear and anger warred inside of me, the gravity, the *reality* of the situation slamming into me with enough force to break bones.

Had we moved to this cottage, this place of isolation, not in consequence of my father's death...but because of *me*? Had my loved ones sacrificed everything to keep me from hurting anyone else?

I straightened my spine against the horrible truth of whatever she prepared to tell me. When the silence stretched on, me trying my damndest to hold on to my sanity, I knew I couldn't take much more. I'd already had too much hacking away at my soul.

"Tell me!" I demanded when she remained quiet for too long, my nerves already on edge.

Patricia spoke at last. "Reila, honey, you were born with something...extra."

"What, like a tail that some doctor had to snip off?"

My joke went sideways; her dark eyes were serious and a little sad. At once she looked like she'd aged ten years and the weight of the day, the weight of our *life*, pressed down on her hard enough to cause extra lines around her mouth and eyes. Had I been too hard on her earlier?

"I know what you're thinking. There is nothing wrong with you, sweetheart, and there never has been. Gray might have gone a little overboard with whatever he said tonight, but I want to assure you that you have *always* been normal. To me. To your father and brother and to the people who really matter. I don't care what anyone says or what you might have done." She dropped her gaze to her quaking hands.

"Stop dancing around the truth, please," I urged. If she kept stalling, I would lose it.

"I'm simply saying that Gray doesn't know what he's talking about. At least, he doesn't know the *details* of the situation because he wasn't there when it happened. He wasn't invited to the castle the evening it happened."

Castle? A dense ball of fear settled in my stomach and filled my mouth with the taste of copper. I could tell there was more to be said, more she wanted to keep from me, and apprehension warred with the pressing need to know more.

"What...did I do?" I whispered. "Did I really curse someone?"

Pathetic. I was pathetic for not being able to remember. I focused on the sound of my breathing, the erratic way my heart beat.

It couldn't be so bad. Nothing we couldn't fix, right?

Then why did the town hate me?

My mother turned away from me, worrying her lower lip.

"Whatever it is you think you're keeping me from, even to protect me, I deserve to know." I tapped the side of my head until the nail on my index finger bit into my skin. "I deserve to know why I can't remember anything outside of the last five years, and why the people in the village treat me like some kind of freak."

"You're not a freak," Patricia insisted immediately. She slid closer to me, droning on about my virtues. About all the good I'd done for the family in the last few years.

She thought I didn't catch those words. *The last few years*. But what about before?

Close to tears, with tension like static electricity sparking in the air around us, I didn't want to listen to that. "Please, Momma. Stop treating me like a child and tell me the truth! I'm begging you."

She heaved a sigh. "You're a witch, all right?"

The statement burst out of her and rocked through me from my head to my heels. My lips opened but no sound came out for the longest time.

"But witches don't exist," I finally said.

"Yes, sadly they do, and you have enough power inside of you to bring down the entire continent if you desired. There was an...*incident* about five years ago, after your father died and we moved into town. You had your heart set on this man —"

"Merek Lyndon?" The *prince*. I didn't even know Halsworthy had a prince.

There were a lot of things I didn't know. Or couldn't remember.

Patricia inclined her head in recognition of the name. "Yes, Prince Merek. You had your heart set on him and fate had you two meeting. I might have thought you'd have a chance, until he did something to damage your trust. You...went a little overboard."

Overboard?

Was that what she wanted to call it? Even now the weight of the unknown felt like a blanket stifling me, and I couldn't breathe. Gray had called him a beast. Cursed. What did I do to the man?

"I turned him into something inhuman, didn't I," I said through numb lips.

"Honestly, honey, I'm not exactly sure what you did to him." Patricia sighed. She slid a hand through her thinning gray hair. "I wasn't there when it happened, so I can only go on rumors and what I saw with my own eyes when you finally found your way home. But I don't want you to worry. The village hasn't suffered with his absence. In fact, if anything Bellmare is flourishing without him. It's for the best this way."

"What did you see when I came home?" I asked her. Then slid my palms tight beneath my knees to keep from fidgeting.

Patricia's chin clenched as she tried to determine what to tell me and what to withhold. "You stumbled home completely out of your wits. I didn't know what to do with you. Your dress was torn, dirt and mud everywhere, and your eyes...Reila, *your eyes*. You didn't recognize me. The spellcasting must have cost you more than I realized because it took you days just to wake up from whatever sleep or trance you'd put yourself in. The burnout, my God... I worried for your life! It was several weeks longer before you realized where you were, who you were, and who I was. You didn't recognize Thomas at first and it nearly broke his heart. But the memories from before that night came back slowly. In spits and spats. You didn't seem to know that you were a witch but you remembered your family, and I never pressed the issue with you. Having no magic myself, it didn't seem wrong to keep you in the dark."

Patricia paused before she scooted closer yet. “Reila, this was a blessing.” It was her “mother voice.” The one she reserved for special occasions. “Magic...it’s not supposed to exist anymore. It has been relegated to the sphere of fantasy because people fear it. And when it became evident that you were born with magic power, I was afraid for you because there was nothing I could do to safeguard you in any way. So when your memory was erased, I considered it a blessing. I thought you’d be safer not knowing.”

I gasped. “It’s a piece of who I am.” And explained why so many strange things kept happening around me. How did I make her understand the *toll* that having such knowledge withheld from me had cost? “An extremely large piece, apparently. You didn’t think it was necessary to tell me even when it was clear I’d lost my way?”

“Don’t blame me. I didn’t know what to do! You were so headstrong. You insisted on seeing the prince against my wishes and something terrible happened. When you lost your memories, well, it almost seemed like it was fate. It was meant to be this way, to give you a chance at a normal life. A normal future.”

I couldn’t hate my mother for not telling me the truth, although to be honest a part of me wanted to, wanted to rage against her like this was all her fault. A tingling of power began in my fingertips and trailed blue fire until my arms were engulfed in dancing flames.

No, I whispered to myself, *not like this*, and the flames slowly dissipated. This kind of power could hurt people. Had wounded someone, if the story about the prince was true.

My fear turned to dread, sick and wet, curling up from my stomach and into my throat until I felt like I would throw up. I placed a hand over my roiling gut and tried to tell myself to breathe.

This was nothing I couldn’t fix. Right? If I had indeed cast some kind of spell, well then, I could un-cast it. Or reverse it. Or whatever the process was called. If I had the power to *do* it, surely I had the power to *undo* it.

Right?

“If Merek Lyndon is the prince of the kingdom,” I said, “then why hasn’t anyone spoken about him? Why hasn’t the town rallied to try to break his curse and restore him to his power?” It sounded similar to Patricia with her poor health: better to slip it into a dark corner and ignore it entirely.

There were too many things about this situation I didn’t understand.

Patricia shook her head. “I never personally met him. His status was so far above ours, even before we lost our fortune. He’s royalty, Reila. His grandparents owned half the town while they were alive, and when they passed away most of it went to their only son, Adrian, who took hold of this territory after the war and became king. Adrian married, and together they had a son, Prince Merek. The only offspring, the heir to the throne. Spoiled, by all accounts. More concerned with the personal freedom his status afforded than with the health and happiness of the people he was destined to rule. He’s been a recluse since the ball you went to all those years ago. Out of sight, out of mind.”

“And no one thought it was necessary to tell me what had happened?” I asked bitterly.

Because it was as if the whole town had gotten together to keep this from me, draping themselves in the secrecy and going on with their lives as though nothing had changed.

“Some tried, in the early days. Those closest to the monster—I mean, the *man*.” Patricia hurried to cover her mistake. “They would show up at our door, threatening, trying to break inside to get to you, to find a way for you to reverse

what had been done. But you were so fragile then. You'd lost your memory, didn't understand what was happening, and I thought it best to keep you away from everyone. Eventually, when every avenue seemed exhausted, well, people went on with their lives and did what they needed to do to restore order. As I said, we are better for the prince's absence. The town council has run things smoothly these past years."

The roiling in my stomach intensified until even the soft press of my hand there did nothing to calm me down. "What about Merek?"

What had I done to someone who hadn't deserved it? Or maybe he had. *I didn't know*. Just like I didn't know what to do with the power inside of me. Or if I could even harness it again after whatever blowout I'd forced upon myself.

"No—no, I can't just...just stay here. Forever. Until I die. Maybe...maybe there is some other way, or someone else who could find a way out." I mastered my uneven breathing, shoving away the panicked, bleating thoughts.

Patricia shifted on the couch, uncomfortable with my line of questioning. "I'm not sure what to tell you. For the first few months, the talk in town was that he tried whatever he could to reverse the curse placed on him." She pointedly avoided mentioning my part in it. "But after that, he faded into the background. I'm not even sure if he still lives around here anymore. He rarely came out of his castle as it was. It could be he *died*. No one knows, and if they do, no one speaks about it. Reila—"

Restless energy filled me and I stood, ignoring the quaking in my knees. The day had long since turned to twilight and I steadied myself by flicking on the lamps on either side of the couch. "I need to do something. I need to fix this."

Patricia reached for me, to pull me down to her again. "Honey, what can you possibly do? You don't have that kind of power anymore. And even if you did, without your memories how are you going to know what to do to reverse the curse? You could end up doing more harm than good. You could end up hurting yourself again. For what? For some man you don't even know?"

I *had* known him, once. "I need to make it right," I insisted.

"I'm worried for your safety if you leave the house. Especially now, considering your rejection of the Matthews boy."

"Maybe you should be worried about the poor prince enduring whatever hell I laid upon him." My hand went to my head and massaged the ache between my eyes.

I didn't want to give in to the "oh poor me" victim mentality, but keeping it at bay took more discipline than I possessed. Power. I had power, and a lot of it. Now that I had tuned in to the frequency, I felt it inside of my body, a churning miasma of magic that strangely filled the air with the faint scent of roses. Roses had been my father's favorite in the days when he and my mother kept immaculate gardens.

"Reila, sit down," Patricia said, injecting as much authority into her thin tone as possible. I always called it her Lady of the Manor voice, vastly different from the mothering tone she'd used before. Now, it made no difference how she spoke to me. "Get whatever silly notion of atonement you have out of your head. There's nothing that you can do. Sleep on it at least, and see where things leave you in the morning. I don't want you mucking around with things best left in the past."

"Mucking around? That's exactly what I did. I mucked around in things I didn't understand and I stole his future from him."

If he even still lived around here, as my mother had said. How was I going to find him in the first place?

"No. There has to be something I can do to make this right. Give me a clue where to find him. I'm leaving immediately."

CHAPTER 5



Cars went the same way as technology after the war. There were pockets in the European Union where tech flourished, cities rising in the wake of these hot spots while the rest of the world went back to a simpler time. A time without cell phones or computers because we had no choice but to adapt. Adapt or move.

Working cars were few and far between and those were reserved for people with enough money to maintain them and to purchase the parts.

My father had taken such pride in his car. That I remembered. And although Patricia kept the piece of junk after his death, now it sat in the backyard like a rusted lawn ornament. I wasn't sure the old thing would work anymore, too many components in need of replacement and the engine sounding like rocks in a barrel being pushed down a hill if it managed to crank at all.

There was enough summer light left for me to make my way toward the castle on horseback. A proficient rider since the early days of my life, I'd do better on Rudy.

Patricia ran after me, a split second behind and her breathing harsh. Her legs threatened to fail her.

"Reila, stop!" she called out. "This is ridiculous. You can't just go tearing off on a wild notion at this hour. No one has been up to the castle in years. There's no guarantee Prince Merek is even there. He might be traveling to find a cure. Stop and *think* for a moment. That place...it's not for you. The people say it's a place of nightmares, a place no decent woman would go alone."

I grabbed an old jacket draped over a lawn chair and wrapped it around my waist, pushing away from the sagging porch toward the lean-to at the corner of the property. "From what you say, the way the town has forgotten about him, I owe it to him to try," I insisted.

Didn't I?

"You're going to fight your way up the mountain at night?"

"I will once you tell me the way."

She knew she didn't have an option. My mind was made up. Patricia told me the general direction to the castle, at the end of a trail I'd started down many times, one leading directly up into the mountains farther than the eye could see. I knew most of the way by heart, I assured myself. If I'd been there before, then I should have no problem returning, though I battled the dusk and the coming of night.

We had managed to keep our old gelding Rudy after the move from our estate, even when feeding a horse pushed the boundaries of our pocketbook. I hadn't been able to part with him, a last gift from my father before he succumbed to illness.

That too I remembered.

“Reila, *slow down*.” Behind me, Patricia labored to keep up.

But I was on a mission. Rudy stuck his head out of the old shed at the sound of our voices, chewing on a pile of hay. With a swift pat on his nose, I slipped through the half door to gather his bridle and prepare him for the ride. I didn’t need to bother with a saddle. Not when he responded beautifully to my unspoken commands.

Patricia trailed me, watching as I slipped the bridle over Rudy’s head, the leather reins lying across his butter-yellow hide.

“Nothing I can say is going to change your mind, is it?” she put in quietly. “You’re dead set on going. Tonight.”

“You won’t change my mind, no.” Then, hating myself for the harshness of that word, I turned to my mother with a sigh. “This is going to eat me alive until I see for myself. Do you not understand the severity of what I’ve done?”

I didn’t understand what I’d done. And maybe that was the worst part. Maybe that’s why the need to go tonight rested heavily on me. Heavily enough I’d brave the dark to travel to a castle I’d never seen.

One I didn’t *remember* seeing, I mentally corrected. I must have been there at some point.

Patricia drew the edges of her sweater tighter around her midsection in an attempt to keep calm. “It was a long time ago. Long enough to be someone else’s problem. Think about this. Do you really believe if Merek is still there he’ll take kindly to seeing you? He could hurt you, kill you even.”

“Yes, it’s been years, which means I’ve wasted enough time.” Gritting my teeth, I led the horse out of the shed and hoisted myself up, settling on Rudy’s back until I found my seat.

Patricia walked forward enough to rest her hand on the horse’s flank. Stared up at me. Pleading with me to reconsider.

“You don’t know where you’re going and you’ll lose the light soon. This is a poor idea, Reila, and one I cannot find any justification in. Do not go. Please.”

“I’ll find my way,” I said with a confidence I wasn’t sure I felt. “Trust me, Momma.” A hand went to my heart. “I have to do this. Okay?”

She stared up at me for a moment longer before bowing her head, chin dropping to her chest. “I understand how that feels. I’ll tell your brother you had to leave for an emergency. But come back to us. Soon.”

“I will. Give him a kiss goodnight for me.”

She *would* understand, I knew, because after Dad died, she’d done everything in her power to try and keep my brother and me away from the horrors of his disease, as well as the loss of our income and fortune. She’d tried to pretend like things were normal, things were fine, pushing through to keep the two of us in a protective cocoon instead of giving in to her grief.

The way she should have been able to, had it not been for—

Me.

I remembered bits and pieces of her struggle, *our* struggle, yet so much of my history remained a mystery to me. Perhaps tonight I’d finally find out why.

“I’ll come back to you both, okay? I won’t be gone too long. But I have to at least try. I won’t be able to rest until I take the first step,” I said, reining in Rudy to keep him steady.

“Then be safe and return swiftly.”

I dropped low, tightening my grip around Rudy’s barrel-like body, to place a kiss on the top of Patricia’s head. “Be good. No smoking while I’m gone. I’ll know.”

I left her with the gentle warning as I dug in my heels. A cluck of my tongue had Rudy taking off out of the backyard and along the quiet confines of the meadow to our rear.

Dark trunks of maple and oak rose into the blue and violet hush of sky. Rudy knew his way along these trails, had taken them thousands of times with me when I needed space. When I found it was quite impossible to lose myself in the pages of a book no matter how hard I tried.

A deep forest surrounded the town of Bellmare on three sides, a tempestuous sea on the fourth. It kept us isolated. It kept us safe, or so I'd believed. I admit I'd never given a thought to who ruled our little country. Government didn't have any effect on my life. On my day to day activity.

Now that I thought about it, how strange it felt to have no knowledge of those in power, content to live in ignorance. In my defense, I'd been dead set on researching how to find my lost memories to take an interest in much else.

I finally felt I'd taken a step in a productive direction tonight. At least I knew these woods. Since moving into the cottage, I'd taken to walking or riding the forest paths and now they were as familiar to me as the back of my hand.

Fields led into the darkness of the trees and the land slowly ascended. The horse's hooves clopped along the rocky ground and I focused on the sound, paying attention to the surroundings. The rest of the town dropped off until the slanted roofs and stone buildings grew small. Hardly anyone was out at this time of evening.

Sunset came and went, leaving me in navy and violet shadows, and I urged Rudy to keep up the pace as we moved ever higher. The trails leading up the mountainside were small and overgrown from disuse but I had the distinct impression I'd come this way before. I didn't remember, didn't know how long it would take to reach the castle.

I simply knew we would.

"Good boy," I said to the horse in gentle tones. "Keep going, now. You're doing wonderfully. It's only a little further and then you can rest."

Keeping my chin defiantly tilted up, we left the town behind and made our way forward. As much as I hated the idea of leaving home, I hated more the idea of someone in pain because of me.

I wasn't the same girl who had cursed the prince. No, she wasn't a girl, but a *witch*. A witch now dressed in loose pants and her father's old shirt which was much too large for her. A witch who had turned a man into a monster by the mere force of her thoughts.

It frightened me.

Somehow, I could not get the image of the witch I used to be and the image of myself in the mirror this morning to merge. To me, they seemed to be two different people.

The horse whickered and his muscles tensed beneath my legs. Pulling him to a halt, I glanced around the navy twilight.

"What's the matter, Rudy?" I asked out loud, slipping from his back and giving him a reassuring pat on the neck. "It's okay. You're okay, boy."

It didn't take long for both of us to figure it out. Rudy shook his head and backed down the trail as the first of the creatures slunk from between two tree trunks. More followed.

The nearest beast turned to me with serpentine eyes. I lunged for the horse, for the jacket I'd brought and the knife held within the left zippered front pocket. Five shadows slipped through the oak trees, dark and silent, like someone had plucked

the night sky down and given it form.

“Hello, *little girl*.”

The hissed voice shot straight to my marrow.

This was a creature I had never seen before. One that had slipped through nightmares into the physical realm to rend and tear, to slaughter mortals like me. One I should have been prepared to kill if I’d been smarter, faster.

Huge slitted eyes greedily took me in. The creature paused across the clearing, and I trained my knife on it defensively.

It smiled to reveal a row of sharp white teeth, a long pink tongue darting out. “What surprise has the night sent us? A gift, sisters,” the creature said in sibilant hisses, amber gaze shifting toward the top of my head. “A meal.”

“Not much there to make a decent meal. We can split the pony between us,” another one put in with a flex of its claws.

A sense of the surreal surrounded the small clearing. “What *are* you?” I called out.

I tugged Rudy’s reins to back him away—toward the slightly sloping hill and the cottage we’d left far below, keeping my knife trained on the pack.

“We are nothing to concern yourself with, child.” This from the closest one. “An ant does not need an introduction to the foot about to crush it.”

My breath came in thin gasps, as though my lungs were not powerful enough to draw into my body what I needed. There was no one around, no one to come if I screamed, if I cried for help.

Every sense remained on high alert as I steered the horse in the opposite direction. I shouldn’t have dismounted, I thought belatedly. Too late for that now. I was sure they’d be upon me before I could get back on Rudy and ride away.

I didn’t have the physical strength to take on these creatures. Already my arm trembled just from gripping the knife in readiness. Only heartbeats left to make up my mind what to do. To see if I could spin a plan faster than they could pounce. The lead beast stared at me as though enjoying my fear.

A scream ripped through me as the lead beast suddenly surged forward, the long column of its furred neck stretching out, jaws open wide and fangs exposed.

And I kept screaming as those fangs bit deep into my ankle.

CHAPTER 6



They wanted to kill me. And they could do it with ease.

Branches and twigs snapped around me as Rudy whirled, his frightened neighs urging me into action despite the pain. I struggled to hold on to the reins with one hand, slashing blindly with the knife in the other. Breaking free of those fangs at last, I lashed out with my uninjured leg. The heel of my boot collided with the creature's face and the resulting snarl was unlike anything I'd heard before in the natural world.

The creature fell back a bit, as if in pain or perhaps sheer surprise that I'd fought back. That gave me precious seconds to heave myself onto the horse's back. "Go, Rudy! *Go!*"

I clucked my tongue and used my legs and feet to get the horse to move, meanwhile landing another kick to the creature's face when it lunged forward again. My aim was true and it fell back with a roar. No room for a killing shot. They were circling too close, Rudy unable to run without a clear direction. He bolted away from a peripheral attack and nearly slammed us both into the trunk of a tree.

With my horse panicking and the danger edging ever closer, I didn't have time to think. Situating myself more securely on the horse's back, I urged Rudy over the fallen tree limb blocking us to the left and we raced along the path we'd used earlier. Wind and branches whipped at us with every passing second.

We were too deep in the woods, too far from help against the grunts and howls trailing us for me to pause or to give even a second of doubt any merit. It took all my focus to keep my horse steadily moving forward but not so panicked and helter-skelter that he risked losing his footing. That would have meant certain death for us both.

Had the beasts been lying in wait? Waiting for someone—anyone—to cross their path and ensure their next meal was an easy one? Were they a dark and dangerous part of the forest no one had warned me about?

Both were just as likely explanations and neither would matter in the end if we didn't make it out. And the odds for that were dwindling fast because I could hear the creatures sprinting behind us, sibilant hissing interspersed with growls sounding louder and louder the more they gained on us.

My only hope of getting us out of there alive was to outrun them, which seemed less and less likely, or somehow learn to harness and use the magic my mother told me I possessed. I didn't let myself think about the distance we'd already traversed, or how far we would need to bolt once we cleared the forest. Or what would happen if the beasts actually caught us.

Blood streamed from the puncture wounds on my ankle, a trail for them to follow.

“Rudy, go! Hurry!”

A thrash of my hands on the reins had the faithful old steed moving at top speed, careening around trees and brush at an unsafe pace as the crashing behind us became louder. I veered the horse to the right, holding on tight when he leaped over downed limbs and trunks in our path. Running at this speed might have dissuaded a normal predator but did nothing to keep these monsters at bay.

I tried to call the power I’d felt swirling inside of me. The heat and the life that had once been so powerful it cursed a man into a different form. I barely felt anything except the warm sting of tears sliding down my face. I didn’t even have time to wince at the emptiness inside of me. Not as two furred bodies flanked the horse to close us in.

Cut us off.

Something inside of me ached as I pushed toward that empty hole, focusing solely on the magic I knew I had and letting the horse have his head. I fought for the magic I’d seen only in small doses until now.

I can do it.

This was a little different from causing a feather to levitate. I walked a thin line between life and death with this one.

But the creature to the left rushed at the horse, fast enough I could only shift to the side at the last minute to avoid the slash of teeth and claw. The upset balance had me swinging over Rudy’s side unable to catch myself and landing on the soft dirt. I stumbled, coming down hard on my shoulder and swinging up into a standing position, head dizzy and the rest of me aching.

“Get away!”

I swung the knife in a wide arc to keep the rest of the monsters at a distance, the horse continuing on. Without me. I didn’t blame him, not when I would have done the same if given the opportunity.

But it left me alone with my attackers.

I nearly lost my grip on the knife when the beast to the right pounced. The blade was a near miss but the hilt connected with its face and blood poured from a slash, accompanied by a screech.

Luck. Sheer, *dumb* luck.

I used the confusion to hurdle over the body without pause and chase after Rudy. Knowing the rest of them followed me. The wound on my ankle made the going slow, and I’d made it only a few feet before one of the beasts passed me then stopped in front of me.

“Do you think you can escape with your life?” it hissed. “Answer honestly, tender morsel. Do you think you know these woods well enough to get away? Surrender quietly. All that rushing about gives a vile flavor to your flesh.” And then he—she?—*it* licked its lips in a terrifyingly grotesque manner.

I tried to slice the knife at its head, my grip turning my knuckles white though I missed every time.

“Poor little human thinks she still has a chance,” the first beast spat to its comrades. Their sharp-toothed smiles grew larger.

Teeth gritted, I replied with, “I think you can all go back to the hell you crawled from.”

I tried to sound more confident than I felt despite the inky-black fear working its way through my body. They laughed, stepping closer inch by inch.

“Silly little human. You will make a tasty morsel, for certain.”

“I don’t even taste good!” I yelled to them in dubious defiance.

I kicked out with my booted foot toward the closest. He dodged it like I'd tried to swat a gnat. To be hunted like this, like an antelope surrounded by hungry hyenas, like a rabbit in a circle of ravenous coyotes, was nothing I'd experienced before. It did not sharpen my instincts. It did not urge me to fight or flight. If anything, I froze.

If there was ever a time for magic, this was it. I needed help. Needed a flash of light, a boom of thunder, a plume of fire—anything to scare these beasts away.

Come on, magic, work!

The snapping heat of power flashed once through my fingertips. A taste. Or a *warning*. I wasn't sure. It wasn't enough to do anything but remind me that I had failed.

I had no real power. In fact—

A loud roar suddenly cut through the clearing an instant before the closest beast pounced toward me, a clawed paw swiping the wrist that held the knife. It clattered against a nearby tree trunk and the sound hung in the now nearly silent woods.

The blood drained from my face and I had mere seconds before the beast pushed me to the ground. The impact jarred every bone in my body to the point where my vision blurred.

"There are things in these woods, girl, that would shake you to your core, and we are but one of them." It breathed against my cheek, the huff of an exhalation carrying the stench of rotting meat. "We won't leave a trace of you for your family to mourn. All who walk through these woods now are ours."

Not like this, please. My mother will die. My brother won't survive on his own without me.

White-hot terror raged through me. I couldn't think, couldn't breathe, reaching for power I could no longer count on.

The beast had me pinned, dripping jaws looming closer. I dodged the contact and brought my knee up to crack against the soft underside of its belly. The first kick did nothing. The second gave me an inch of wiggle room, and I took advantage of it.

Claws caught my shirt and yanked as I tried to run, rending the cloth into shreds as the rest of them came for me then. My skin tore beneath those frenzied claws.

The magic wouldn't come. I realized it at last. The magic I'd wasted foolish time trying to call when I could not. The burnout must have done serious damage to whatever part of me used to control the power.

Those claws flashed in front of my eyes, long and lethal. Perfect for the brutality they had planned for me. The beast opened its mouth, fangs flashing, as a second mighty roar cut through the clearing. Loud enough to shake the trees and cause leaves to tremble and fall.

Except I had a sick feeling it hadn't come from any of *these* monsters.

I was so dead.

The noise hadn't finished echoing before the beast closest to me went flying, crashing into a tree so hard that the wood cracked.

The fear from before seemed a distant echo to what I felt now. The bone-chilling terror that there was something else out there, larger and more deadly than the creatures that had stalked me. Black-tipped claws tore into the first beast to the point where it released its grip on me, shrieking.

I'd never heard such an awful sound as the newcomer's claws shredding through muscle and sinew. Blood poured as flesh was ripped from bone, the ground eagerly soaking it up.

Unable to breathe, I crawled toward the tree where my knife had been thrown, keeping low to the ground. Trying to hide. My insides nearly melted at the next roar, and I hardly dared to look over my shoulder at the claws, the teeth, the carnage.

“Run!”

It took precious time for me to recognize that guttural syllable as a clear, concise word. My gaze darted toward the newcomer.

It—*he?*—whirled around to grab one of the creatures as it tried to escape, darting for the dark cover of the surrounding woods. It would have made it had the bigger beast not taken hold of its tail, spinning it around and slamming its head against a tree. Then threw it to the ground and disemboweled it with one long swipe of deadly claws.

“Damn you, I told you to run.”

He dispatched the rest of the creatures with relative ease. I remained on the ground, half buried in fallen leaves and twigs. I’d managed to locate my knife, still gripped in my hand with my knuckles turned bone-white. Although he’d warned me to run, I couldn’t. I didn’t even try. The shaking was so bad that I would not have gotten two steps from where I’d fallen. It was all I could do to keep from splintering apart as I tried to make sense of what I was seeing.

The beast rose to its full height with a snarl, his snout turned reddish-black with blood and his claws covered in the same. Entrails from the defeated creature’s sliced belly decorated the forest floor and stained the remaining grass an unimaginable color.

Please, don’t let him look at me.

The gods heard my prayer...and laughed at me.

Feral rage smoldered in his eyes when he turned to me, and I flinched as if struck. “You shouldn’t be here,” he growled.

I opened my mouth to answer. Unsurprised when nothing came out. Shocked further when the beast knelt beside me.

He reached for me, but I flinched away from the bloody claws. Terrified, I raised myself into a sitting position before the shaking resumed. I knew I couldn’t stand. Not like this.

“Why didn’t you run?” he asked, the tone still a growl but the words simple, plaintive almost. The wrath faded from his eyes, and at last the claws slipped beneath the skin.

How could I explain that I *couldn’t* run? I had been paralyzed, hadn’t been able to force myself to move, to act, once he’d arrived.

“You come to my doorstep and bring these beasts with you.” A shake of his head and then he rose, higher and higher until his shoulders blotted out the light of the moon through the tree branches. “The least you could do is say thank you. Otherwise *you* would be nothing but a pile of entrails on the ground. Or worse.”

Worse? What could be—

Oh. Yes. *Eaten.*

Definitely worse.

A frisson of adrenaline swept through me. Everything inside of me urged me to bolt this time. To do what I should have done in the first place and get far, far away from this place. From this *thing* looming above me with the strength and might of a god at his disposal. I remembered the sound of his roar and the primal fury it carried. As though the force of it had imprinted on my soul.

The beast swayed once before dropping to his knees, eyes rolling back in his head.

Now was my chance to make my escape. I should take it.

Something stopped me. “Do you—” I began.

Hands raised to his head, he moaned and panted. “Give me a minute, please. I need...I...”

“Whoa, there. Are you okay?” I felt the need to move closer somehow and inched forward on my hands and knees.

A howl in the distance echoed my inner sentiments when he suddenly pitched forward and collapsed, those deadly fangs inches from my legs.

CHAPTER 7



I sat huddled on the ground staring at the now unconscious monster who'd come out of the shadows to rescue me.

Rescue me? No. Condemn me.

It was like trading one problem for another larger problem, and this one with bigger claws and the strength to wipe out a colony of human-eating creatures.

I am going to die tonight.

My thoughts circled around that singular sentiment. But, I tried to tell myself, he'd *helped* me, he'd *spoken* to me, and now—

What did I do next? The horse had taken off, long gone, leaving the two of us here with the remains of the flesh-eaters.

I approached the monster slowly, his breathing shallow, the rest of him still and unmoving. Helpless. He'd gone from powerful to helpless in a breath. I had the knife in my hand; I could kill him now. I could rid the world of this threat, so strong and dangerous, before he had the opportunity to hurt anyone.

Something stayed my hand before it even rose, and my palm grasping the knife lowered back to my side.

"Hey." I nudged at him with my toe to see if he would move. "Hey, you. Are you all right? Say something. Are you seriously injured?"

The beast remained quiet, and when the silence continued for several more seconds, I reached out with my free hand, shuddering as I trailed fingers along his furry cheeks. Along the wet, cool blood that had sprayed on him.

There was blood *everywhere*, in fact, and a brief pat of my own face assured me that I looked the same as he did. My fingers came away smeared in sticky crimson. The pain in my ankle and shoulder shifted to the rear of my mind as I took him in, my rescuer. And it was work not to give in to my fear at the sight of him.

He sported a large, nasty gash adorning his arm and thigh where one of the monsters had gotten him. Blood seeped from the wounds to mat with his thick fur. His breathing uneven, the awkward rise and fall of his chest accented the bulging muscles there. A heavy brow of more dark fur obscured his closed eyes.

A thread of recognition tugged at me yet I couldn't place it.

"Those wounds look bad," I said out loud, peering closer at the slice in his thigh where the two pieces of skin hung open. "We need to get you somewhere. We need to find someone who can help you."

His doorstep, he'd said? Did that mean that the gray stone turrets I'd glanced before belonged to him? Perhaps there was someone inside who could—

Oh. *No.*

Ooooh boy.

The knowledge hit me harder than a hammer on an anvil.

Glancing down again at the stained tunic and the random cuts of muscle I could see through tears in the fabric, I knew my suspicions were correct. Dear heaven, what had I done?

Merek Lyndon. The Crown Prince of Halsworthy.

The Beast.

My insides shook and I sank back on my elbows when I could no longer support myself. This was what magic could do, I thought with a churning feeling in my gut. This was what *I* had done. To him.

Though night had fallen heavily, I still made out most of his face through the shadows. His body displayed enough human features for him to be recognizable as a man, in some respects. On the other hand...

How I had changed him was unforgivable. Bullish forearms gave way to human-like hands covered in dark coarse fur, with lethal claws hidden beneath the skin, claws that could appear and retract at will. His lower jaw jutted out awkwardly and displayed sharp canines. Taller than a normal man, he would be closer to seven feet tall. Broad shoulders seemed to go on and on.

Gaze rising higher, I took in the longish chestnut-brown fur in tangles around his face. A slight snout poked out where his nose should have been, upper lip protruding slightly to cover fangs.

Human, yes, but a human mixed with something fiercer. More animalistic. Like a gargoyle come to life. There were attributes of both man and beast there, with both vying for supremacy. He was not entirely a man yet one couldn't help but look at him without thinking of a wolf.

I could have lumped him in with the creatures he'd killed if I hadn't seen his eyes.

Swallowing, I struggled to get past my rising nausea. Pushing it aside to focus on getting him some help for his injuries.

He'd saved me. Now it was my turn to save him.

I tugged on the fabric of his tunic to get his attention, or maybe get him to move if I were lucky. My leg twanged in a painful reminder of my own wound. "Come on," I groaned. "We need to get you out of here. You have to help me. I can't do it alone. I'm not strong enough."

No, even with my meager muscles and his help *if* he were conscious, it would still be a struggle to get him up. This predator, honed to kill without a second of hesitation, without remorse, and suddenly I had to get him to move by myself? It seemed impossible. I couldn't handle his weight.

I shivered again, thinking of how he'd come to save me.

I did this to him.

He looked this way because of me, and I couldn't remember a damn thing about it. Good thing he hadn't recognized me. Although I should have guessed his identity when I first saw him.

Maybe I hadn't wanted to. Maybe I had been too afraid. Of him. Of myself.

Keeping my gaze down at his bloodstained paws, I didn't dare glance around at the carcasses scattered around us. Instead, I held my own hands over him, facing down, closing my eyes. Reaching into that deep and empty well where power had once dwelled if only I could remember how to turn the key to unlock it.

It was a bane, this forgetfulness. A curse of its own.

"Please," I murmured under my breath. "Help me get him to the castle. Please. I just need some assistance."

Whatever he was now was a creature of my own making. And he'd still saved me.

“I need just a *little*...”

A little magic. A little help to get us through the darkest part of night. Things always looked better in the morning and I would deal with the implications of this then, because nothing good would come from sinking into victimhood.

Perhaps it made me just as much of a monster as him, if one were to try and balance the scales. But he’d killed for me tonight and I wouldn’t forget that anytime soon. My stomach heaved at the thought. I almost wished he had not.

When I reached down for his arm, wind swirling around me, I felt something click into place. A shifting inside of me that made pulling him a little easier. His body slid along the ground with minimal effort, as though the ground itself helped him along, decreasing the drag, the unseen force that hadn’t wanted to save me when I called for it the last time.

I exhaled. Perhaps the timing hadn’t been right.

Either way, exhausted and limping, I managed to get the two of us ten feet away from the clearing. Then another ten. Until the turrets of the castle began to take shape in the distance and grow larger.

“There now, Merek. Is it all right if I call you Merek? I’d like to think of us on a first name basis after everything that happened,” I grunted, “although I guess we’ll see once you wake. I’m almost afraid to see how our first conversation will go.”

Speaking out loud to myself helped because I needed the comfort to fill the stillness and push past the pain. The magic thread binding me to Merek pulled taut with each step I took. It became harder to focus; my head felt dizzy. The clearing gave way to a deer’s path through the trees and I followed it without hesitation, moving in the direction I remembered seeing the castle.

“Let’s get you home,” I said with a groan.

I fought past the shaking in my body. The ache in my ankle became almost unbearable the longer I pulled him and several times I stumbled. My knees knocked into the ground hard enough to leave bruises. Sweat beaded along my brow.

Trembling, I managed to get Merek up the steep incline and into the castle courtyard, the cobblestones uneven and overgrown with weeds. To the left and right I saw the remnants of a garden, now reduced to nothing but dead stalks.

Ahead, the castle loomed, tall twin turrets on either side, and windows dark, some broken, some covered with wooden boards. Gusts of gray smoke curling up from chimneys clashed against the night sky. Old and ominous, waiting for something—and not in a good way. The castle felt *alive*. And hungry. Gargoyles and carved faces glared down from their timeless perches above the buttresses with eyes that followed my every movement.

Should I turn back? Try to get him into town?

Too late, much too late. What I thought of the place didn’t matter.

I pulled the prince through an archway covered in black lichen and moss. Then I caught a glimpse of a single light from within the castle and I trudged toward the glow, ignoring my own pain as I tightened my fingers on the prince’s limp arm and willed the magic to hold a little longer, no matter the toll it took on me.

My teeth chattered and I locked my jaw against the motion. A few more steps, one in front of the other. Then we’d be there.

The wide double doors were thrown open by an unseen hand and I stepped over the cracked threshold into the main hall of Prince Merek’s domain. Behind us, wood creaked, and when I dared to check over my shoulder, I saw that both doors had closed once more, like two jaws of a predator waiting for its next meal.

I didn’t want to think about the last time I’d stepped foot in this place. And what I’d done. Maybe not being able to remember was a good thing after all.

The vast emptiness of the great hall stretched toward darkness and I saw no hint of life here. I saw nothing beyond the remnants of old tapestries and curtains, of broken and forgotten furniture. Old tarnished candelabras lined the first few steps of the great curving staircase to provide much-needed illumination. Wax dripped down and pooled on the marble. That must have been the light I'd spied earlier.

"Hello? Is anyone here?" I called out.

The cavernous halls to the left, right, and center all reflected the question back to me a thousand times. Tinny, eerie. Yet strangely familiar.

I didn't remember ever setting eyes on the castle before, and yet I knew I'd been here. In my dreams, in the pages of a book. In the sliver of cord binding Merek and me together thanks to magic.

Shaking my head, I dragged him in silence toward the rear of the castle. A flash of movement caught my attention and when I turned, I saw myself. The mirror image showed a madwoman, pale and drenched in blood, her overly large shirt torn and her eyes wild. Her hair stuck out at all angles with twigs and leaves amidst the chaos.

Who was the beast now?

Tonight, I'd learned something about myself. Even if I wasn't entirely sure I *wanted* to know, I learned I was weak and useless, worse than a newborn fawn in the forest trying to steer clear of the wolves. I could not defend myself, and I had a feeling that if I did not learn, I would not make it through another summer. I would stumble on my next step and not rise again.

Hopefully this would be a good chance for me to be a better person.

The castle appeared frozen, or at least that's how it felt to me. In my mind's eye I saw a giant clock with the hands stuck at a certain hour, a certain minute. Unmoving. There were pieces of broken crockery scattered about and grime on the windows obscuring the starry night sky. There were rusted locks and the hushed sounds of footsteps belonging to no one.

I continued to drag Merek down a long hallway. Locked doors lined the corridor, with dust on the thresholds. I hoped the corridor would lead to the kitchen, delighted when I saw the gleam of a stove ahead. *Thank goodness.*

Propping him up against the wall, I released my hold on him at last and almost dropped to my knees at the rush of energy leaving my body. My breath exhaled on a whoosh I couldn't control. It felt like I'd run a marathon in one-hundred-degree heat with nothing to eat or drink for days.

"Is anyone here?" I called again when I'd caught my breath. The echo lessened in the kitchen, and although I swear I caught faint scraps of whispers, no one came forward.

Alone at last?

I was no doctor. He needed more help than I could give him.

"You...stay here," I warned him unnecessarily, swaying on my feet as black spots danced in front of my eyes. "I'm going to look for something to clean up those cuts and then we'll see where we stand. *If* I can stand for much longer."

I followed the smeared trail of blood back down the hallway, peeking in door after door to search for gauze and alcohol. I'd have given anything for a first aid kit.

I was nothing but a fool to think I could stroll in here and casually mend what I'd broken. I tried not to think about the guilt, the guilt rising up to strangle me with every step I took further into this man's domain. I *had* done this. Loosed the spell, caused this gloom that had settled over each stone and brick and piece of wood. The sheen on furniture had dulled, at least those pieces which were still intact, and paintings on the walls were torn or shredded like old wallpaper.

And Prince Merek was bleeding out in the kitchen.

My fault. My fault *entirely*.

I didn't have the specifics I needed to break the curse or whatever it was I'd done to him. But I would try once we survived the night.

Taking hold of another knob, I wrenched open the door and discovered the linen closet. Well, sheets would do the trick. They'd *have* to do since I had not been able to find a first aid kit to save my life.

Or *his* life, rather.

I brought the whole sheet back into the kitchen, grabbing a knife from a wooden block and tearing it into strips to bind him and stop the loss of blood. A quick search of a pantry provided an inch of brandy in a corked bottle. Enough. It would be enough.

I saw no dust in the kitchen; the countertops were spic-and-span. A tea kettle sat on a burner, steam rising from the spout though no fire now came from the burner. That must have been the glow from the stove I'd spied earlier. Therefore someone had turned it off as I approached, although no one else had shown their face. Though it seemed significant, I had more important things to focus on, so my mind stored the information away for later.

I used the last of my energy to settle at the prince's side, with the brandy bottle at the ready. An angry swell of pain in my ankle reminded me of my own injury. Well, one problem at a time.

"I'd like to say in advance I'm sorry for this. It's probably going to sting a bit." Taking out the cork with my teeth, I spat it aside, aimed the bottle at the largest cut, and poured.

Merek woke with a roar, sprang to his feet, whirling around to face me wearing a murderous scowl.

CHAPTER 8



Seconds ticked by until the recognition settled into place. On his part, at least. The roar of sound faded off into deadly silence. I still had no idea what kind of person I faced though I watched his expression shift and change, noticing every emotion in his eyes. And when Prince Merek finally figured out who it was who had poured the alcohol over his wound, he hissed, baring his teeth, though murder remained on his face.

“You.”

The word came out low and poisoned.

I wasn’t surprised when he reared back, towering over me despite the slice to his thigh, with his uninjured arm flung behind him poised to strike.

I clutched the bottle against my chest, knowing that if he chose to slit my throat with one of those claws, I had no strength left to get away and save myself. I had no weapon, only the bottle, which I doubted would do any good against a raging beast. Trembling, I just waited and stared.

That did nothing but further enrage him.

“What are you looking at?” he bellowed. “You aren’t welcome here!”

Before I knew how to react, Merek reached down and grabbed my arms, pulling me up to him. He slammed me against the wall. His chest pressed to mine and his grip remained unbreakable. The rough stone bit into my back.

“Do you know what you did to me?” he growled against my ear when he leaned closer, sniffing at my hair. “Take a good look. Stare again at the monster in front of you. It’s been so long since the two of us last stood face to face.”

My blood went cold. His meaning was clear. He wasn’t going to let me walk out of this castle alive. I would pay for what I’d done.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered under my breath. My lower lip trembled. “I want to make things right. Th-that’s why I’m here.”

He slammed me again, hard enough for stars to dance in front of my eyes when the back of my head whipped against the wall. His grip tightened to the point where the tips of his claws punctured through my shirt and skin but I made sure not to cry out.

“What makes you think you will live long enough to make it right?” he asked roughly.

Those words were enough to sap the air from my lungs and whatever strength remained of me. Oh God, I’d made a mistake. A terrible mistake. I’d found the right place, yes, and the right man, but not enough of his humanity remained for him to think before reacting. And his first reaction?

To kill me in revenge for what I’d done to him.

When I spoke again it was a bit louder, any fight drained along with the rest of my energy. This time I didn't try to hide my shivers. Let him feel the way I reacted to his roars and threats. "I *am* sorry. I don't remember what I did. I don't remember anything."

The sound he made tread the line between laugh and growl. "You don't *remember*. How convenient."

He dropped me immediately and I slumped to the floor, the threat still shining in his eyes when I dared to look up at him. Blood continued to drip from the wounds he'd re-opened with his sudden movements. They added to the picture of madness he presented.

"You have a lot of nerve showing your face in this castle, Miss Barnes. More nerve than I expected after so many years," he said. "What was it that brought you back here, hmm? A desire to take one more look at the beast before you met your own death?"

I jolted. *He knows my name*. I wasn't sure why the thought surprised me. I shifted to balance on my knees, the bottle still gripped in my left hand. I couldn't have dropped it if I wanted to; the rest of me had frozen in place.

"Prince Merek—" I started.

Wrong thing to say.

He roared before I could finish, the sound deafening, shaking the rafters of the room. Fear clenched inside of me even as another piece of me blazed with fire.

"You don't get to call me that!" he shouted. "My name does not pass your lips. Do you understand me?"

Keep calm. Keep collected.

I didn't wince this time, though I barely managed to restrain myself. "I understand," I replied. My reed-thin voice did not come out with the force I'd hoped. I tried to remind myself that his anger stemmed from hurt. A deep, raw wound infected with hatred. If the roles were reversed, I would feel the same.

"I thought the scent was familiar when I heard the commotion in the woods. Then I assured myself it could not possibly be the witch, the *temptress*, who cursed me to a lifetime of this." He indicated his face, his appearance, his gaze hot and furious. "Surely she would not be so ridiculously *stupid* to show her face to me after all these years. If I'd truly guessed *you* were out there, I would have let the creatures have at you."

Merek shook his head, his chuckle low and abrasive. The haunting sound had my stomach clenching.

"Do I want to know the truth of what you were doing on my lands in the first place?"

Probably not. "It's...a bit difficult to explain," I hedged. Then shifted until I was standing again, my weight off of my injured ankle. "There are many layers to the situation."

"*Try.*"

I wanted to tell him how much it meant that the man I'd cursed to become a beast had saved me—but I couldn't find the right words.

When I remained quiet for too long, his fangs flashed and another roar sounded. This time I felt it. The entire room trembled beneath that sound as it penetrated my flesh and bones. Heart pounding, I gasped for air, clasping the bottle until my fingers ached. Staring at His Highness's royal furred feet with wicked claws tipping each toe. One step would crush my bones.

Maybe I truly had waited too long. Maybe he'd gone insane with the isolation, the stress of having his body turned into something unnatural. Maybe he'd kill me

where I cowered rather than let me live long enough to explain myself.

I didn't even *have* an explanation!

I prayed for courage even as blinding terror filled me at the continued growl, nearly overwhelming any sane thought. Once again, I'd come face to face with one of those fight or flight moments and found myself paralyzed. Frozen in place and needing more room to breathe.

"I'm not sure what I did to you, and I don't have a reason why I did it," I finally said. It felt as if a stone was pressed against my chest to keep me in place. "But I can understand you being angry with me. You probably think I'm a monster."

"A despicable waste of a human being, more like."

My head spiraled, dizzy. There was no arguing with him. Not even if I had a reasonable retort. "If that's how you prefer to think of me," I replied softly, "then you are well within your rights."

"It took you this long to drag yourself here? Trying to make amends to me?" Rough fingers grabbed my chin and forced me to look up and meet his gaze. *I'm dreaming*. I tried to ignore the odd angles and bulging portions of his beast-like face, keeping my focus to those green eyes. "Five years, witch. Five years and not once did you come back for me. You left me to my own devices. To suffer alone."

"It took me this long because I didn't know about you," I said shakily.

"*Liar.*"

The venom in his voice should not have shocked me, and yet somehow it did. "It's the truth."

"Look at you. As perfect as the last time I saw you. Perfect and untouchable. And I've been confined here in the castle like it's a prison, suffering, while you were out there living your life as though nothing had happened!"

I couldn't look away from the abhorrence in his eyes. Other emotions too, ones I had a harder time placing, but none as dangerous as the hatred.

"I don't know what to say. I didn't know you were here, I didn't know what I'd done, but the moment Gray Matthews mentioned it to me, I knew I had to come."

Merek reeled away, growling again and knocking the nearest cabinet clear off the wall. It crashed across the kitchen and shattered, splinters raining down around us.

"How could you not know I was here? You did this to me! How dare you?"

Any composure I'd tried to maintain shattered.

I reacted without thinking, forcing my legs to hold me despite the pain, bolting past him when his back was turned. I'd made a huge mistake. It was stupid for me to have come. It was stupid for me to think I could right this wrong.

The darkness outside the front doors was unusually thick when they opened again automatically. Though a tug at my midsection urged me to turn around, to deal with Merek with reason and logic, I didn't heed it. Now wasn't the time.

He would never listen to me. I'd assumed too much thinking I could fix this.

"Where are you going, witch!"

His words echoed after me as I ran into the night. He didn't even use my name. He'd called me a witch.

Tears stung my eyes and I didn't know where I'd found the initial strength to run, but it deserted me now. I stopped dead in my tracks at the edge of the courtyard, heaving for breath and leaning my weight away from the injured ankle. Behind me the castle loomed, silent and waiting. My stomach flipped, a queasy sensation rising to my throat.

The night had gotten oddly cold; the forest stretched endless in front of me and the sounds of night creatures screeched nearby. I had to keep going, had to get

away. I marshaled what little strength I had left and forced my feet to move. But each step I took away from the castle had my nausea increasing.

I'd already done too much, and without my magic power, if Merek didn't want me there, then the threat to my life could not be ignored.

"Miss? Miss!"

My eyes darted over my shoulder toward the call—a young girl's voice—catching a flash of honey-colored blond hair before I turned away again.

A castle servant probably, but I wasn't about to stick around to find out. The farther I ran, the fainter her voice grew and the more my lungs ached. I kept my focus on the trail in front of me, slipping through the darkness.

Rudy was long since gone and hopefully safe at home even now. I was taking a great risk moving through those scary woods at night but I didn't plan on waiting for daylight. Not if I faced attacks and name-calling and—

Culpability felt despairingly heavy on my shoulders. Maybe Patricia had been correct in cautioning me to wait for morning. Or better yet, to reconsider my decision.

I'd thought I knew best. I'd thought of nothing but righting the wrong.

Although I should have known, from the way Merek looked at me, that we'd had more of a past connection than I was led to believe. But seeing him as he was now had been an utter surprise.

Tree branches rustled behind me and I swung around, trying to peer through the darkness. Nothing moved, nothing made any sound, so I continued on my way even though my nerves were taut as violin strings.

After some time, fatigue sapped my energy again and I knew I must rest. My ankle still throbbed with pain and every step was torture. I found a tree that had fallen, uprooted, its roots and thick trunk providing enough room for me to consider it proper shelter for the night. I settled in the dirt and dead leaves, trying once again to call my power to me. Trying to find some hint of my former magic, magic that had been strong enough to change a man into a beast.

I found nothing where my memories should be except the usual dark void, found no access to a door that had been slammed shut inside of me. Frustration burned my throat as I burrowed deep into my clothing to stay warm. The chill from the ground seeped into me. It was a summer night but up in the mountains, with the air as thin as my clothing, without a fire one got very cold very quickly.

A fire I had no way to call up even if it meant saving myself. Besides, a fire would have signaled my location. Not just for Merek but for those hideous man-eating creatures I'd encountered earlier. Not to mention who knew what else lurked in the forest shadows.

No, I'd just have to brazen it out as best I could. There was a fallen limb near me and I snatched it up to use as a potential weapon if necessary. As if it would be anything more than a mere nuisance to the powerful creatures. I just needed a little rest before continuing on. Sleep was out of the question. I must stay vigilant.

But despite my best intentions, blackness crept closer and it didn't take long for me to join it.

CHAPTER 9



I woke next to a fire, but in an actual fireplace, not deep in the woods. The flames crackled cheerfully and cast dancing shadows on the walls. I lay on a stone floor, not dirt and leaves. A dream? At least I was no longer chilled to the bone. Tightening my arms around me, I closed my eyes again, vaguely aware of my ankle still throbbing and the rest of me feeling like I'd been through a war. I must be dreaming...

"Are you quite comfortable?"

The eerie echo of a man's deep voice jarred me fully awake with a start, and when I looked up I saw Merek standing there with his arm braced on the mantel, watching me. Judging from the fury in his glower, he still hadn't decided to let me live.

Fury was putting it mildly.

Merek swung his gaze from my eyes to my boots and back again. I stiffened under the weight of his gaze. Not for the first time wished I'd been successful in running away.

You made your choices and now you must pay for them.

But the voice inside my head didn't sound entirely my own anymore.

He took a step closer to me, lowering to crouch in front of me with his elbows balanced on massive thighs. His chest heaved as he stared. Eyes narrowing.

I had nowhere to go, backed up as close to the hearth as I could physically get without singeing my clothes. Merek advanced yet again and closed the distance between us. I held my breath. I knew if I lived to be a thousand years old, I would never recover from the pain and betrayal I saw on his face.

"You saved me," I whispered, swallowing hard. "You came after me."

What I'd done to him shamed me, and though I told myself to raise the walls higher around my heart, to protect myself from his pain, I couldn't do it. Because I was responsible for it.

"Try it again, witch. Just try to leave here a second time and see what happens to you. As far as I am concerned, you put yourself into my hands by coming here, and when you die, it will be at *my* pleasure," he said, his voice a low growl. Full of dark promise. "After this, you are not to go wandering outside. You are to stay within the boundaries of the castle at all times."

Why did it sound less a threat and more a caution?

Finally I found my voice, and when I spoke my throat felt raw. "I didn't think you wanted me here. You made your distaste painfully clear. Why would you concern yourself with keeping me?"

Overwhelmed. Trapped. Alone, with the beast's unnerving presence, as though I'd stepped into an alternate reality.

Inhaling a calming breath, my tentative peace shattered the moment Merek grabbed my face with both hands. His touch electrified me and for a moment I froze, the rest of my exhaustion gone.

"Make no mistake, Reila Barnes. I *don't* want you here," he snarled. He made no effort to keep the hatred from his tone but displayed monumental effort in not letting his claws sink into my skin. "But what I said stands. If anyone hurts you, it will be me. After what you did, I refuse to let you out of my sight. Especially not after you went to such great lengths to deliver yourself right into my hands."

"I can fix this." Unnerved, I reached up and rested my hand over his. Unsurprised when he jerked away, knocking into the chipped coffee table set on the rug behind him in his haste to escape my touch. He turned away.

"Don't you touch me."

Despite my fear, I was oddly grateful to be back at the castle instead of lost in the woods, to be here with him without his fangs showing. I struggled to sit up, though my wracked body complained with every movement.

My attention turned to the soothing warmth of the fire and I willed calmness into my system to replace the fear. Fear wouldn't help anything. The glowing embers reminded me of nights with my brother Thomas, a pot of tea between us and a book on my lap as he told me about his day. In the last few years I could remember, he and I made the evenings our private time. He would come home from school filled with tales from the day while I made our tea and stoked the fire. Setting the stage to listen.

Except Thomas wasn't here and this was a vastly different night.

I broke the stillness, speaking over the snapping of logs in the fireplace. "Why *did* you save me?" I asked at last. "You could have left me out there and let the rest of those terrible creatures return to finish the job. Why didn't you?"

Merek rose to his full height, shrugging massive shoulders, and only then did I notice how he'd wrapped part of the wrecked sheet around his wounds. I had a similar wrapping tightly pressed against my ankle. Huh.

"A life for a life, Miss Barnes. You took mine. And now yours belongs to me. It felt justified," he said.

"Yes. I understand." And, sadly, I did.

He surveyed me warily, like he'd expected me to disagree. I had nothing else to say. He'd saved me twice now, in fact. What I should have voiced was my thanks.

"I want a chance to make things right," I finally said, attempting to adjust my position to alleviate the cramp in my legs. "Please."

"Do you really think you can reverse the spell?"

I didn't detect any sarcasm in his voice. If anything, I heard hope, and I clung to that, focusing on him until black filled the edges of my vision and I saw only his wavering silhouette. *Loneliness*. His life had been nothing but an endless cycle of isolation and loneliness since the day I'd changed him.

I thought about the stories I'd read in the past. The fairy tales where the hero rescues the princess and they share true love's kiss, living happily ever after. Except there were no such things as true love's kiss or a happy ending for all. They were nothing but make-believe stories, printed on paper and bound in leather, products for sale to make the authors and publishers rich. Peddling fantasy.

"I meant what I said to you earlier. I don't remember anything about that night. My memories up to that point are just...gone. I learned secondhand about the curse recently, and I can only think that the backlash from the magic I used caused my amnesia." I stared down at my hands and wished for a book to read. A spine to trail my fingers down, pages of print to ground me, to comfort me even though I knew

I'd find no answers there.

I chose my words with great care, cautious not to reveal that I had no plan in place. That I'd run from my mother's cottage at the first chance and without adequate time to research and prepare. "I'm so sorry I hurt you, but I'm willing to try to fix it," I continued. "I'll do whatever I can to help. Can you please tell me what happened?"

"*I don't remember anything.*" His mocking tone was derisive. Merek turned to glare at me and I met his angry gaze. Beyond the castle walls, the wind howled, rattling the trees with an impending storm and sending leaves scattering. He sat down on the rickety coffee table. "Nothing about this face rings a bell?"

He pointed to himself, looking more beast-like in the light of the fire, his features rougher, harder. This was a man who no longer thought of himself as a human being. I could see it clearly.

"Please tell me what happened," I repeated. I smoothed my fingertips over the scratches on my arms, the swollen places where fang and claw and thorn had pierced through skin.

Merek stared at me for a moment longer before shaking his head. "*No*. There are some things better left in the past. We turn our focus to the future instead, yes?"

We sat in silence, both of our attentions focused on the fire, and my gratitude for him shifted into some kind of neutral territory, the twisting sensations in my stomach easing. I hated that it had come to this. And I especially hated how I couldn't remember a bit of it.

But gone was the timid girl who hid in her humble cottage and wondered why everyone hated her. She'd been replaced by someone with resolve. Someone determined to speak frankly.

Enough moping and feeling sorry for myself. Enough dwelling on a past I could not change. I was here for one reason: to help right a wrong I'd committed. That, coupled with a few of my own selfish desires. To remember. To be better than I was.

"I want to find a way to reverse the curse," I reiterated.

"What makes you think that's even a possibility?" he replied bitterly.

My brow furrowed when I turned to look at him. His limbs were tensed as if ready for a fight. But I'd been through too much tonight to oblige him. Heat rose from his body, enough to rival the flames behind me.

Merek stared into the flames, his features regal. Cold. I noticed the way his claws snagged on the fabric of his pants. I suspected that at one time he'd worn the finest materials money could buy. Now he made do with whatever would fit his monstrous frame.

After a long moment, I stood.

"I'm exhausted and I can't think straight. Hopefully I'll figure things out in the morning. I'll find someplace to sleep." I moved away from the fire, not even knowing where I was going, just...away from him.

He jerked up and suddenly was towering over me with a storm brewing in his deep brown eyes, moving closer and closer and I had nowhere to hide. "You might *thank* me for my decision to let you stay."

"Yes." I nodded and turn away from his accusatory gaze. "You're right. Thank you."

Seeing a crystal decanter on a shelf nearby, somehow miraculously intact, I reached for the amber liquid and didn't bother with a glass. Instead, I popped the lid off and tossed back a long sip, letting the burn seep through me. Not for the taste, but to sear the shame out of myself, to sear away the mounting anger with myself at how far I'd come and how I'd let this mess take shape.

I replaced the decanter and turned back to him, a little bit of liquid courage giving me words. "I don't think you would have bothered to come after me tonight if you weren't ready for a resolution. Whatever the terms of the curse, you haven't been successful in lifting it," I said. "As much as you may want me dead, you want to be released more, and I am your best chance for that. So yes, I believe you'll let me stay here with you until we find a way to reverse it. An arrangement for which I express my deepest thanks."

"HMMMM." It was a long growl, but not an angry one. Was he softening to the idea?

Warmth washed over me like a much-needed shower at the end of the day. What I wouldn't give to curl up beside the hearth, flipping through the well-worn pages of one of my favorite books, letting the words I knew so well wrap me in peace and take me away from reality.

"Now will you show me to a room or should I pick one out for myself?" I didn't add my next thought: *Are there any you haven't destroyed?* In his position, I would have trashed the place in rage as well.

He was achingly careful not to touch me when he moved past me. Fine.

I followed him toward the stairs and in the silence the last of my temper fizzled out. His as well, judging by his lack of growls. Merek led me to a dusty door on the second floor and pushed it open with a moan.

"Still as beautiful as a rose, Reila. Still the bane of my existence no matter how much time has passed. Here. This room is yours for as long as you require it. *Far* away from mine."

My heart quickened. "Thank you."

I turned to offer him a smile of gratitude only to find him gone, his echoing snarl sending me hurrying into the room.

Sighing, I let go of the weight of the day, closing the door behind me and finally letting my spine relax. Finally allowing my hands to hang limp at my sides and the last of the tension to drain. What had I gotten myself into?

How could I have left home when my mother needed me? Maybe *I'd* gone mad as well.

I stood inside the room unmoving, knowing that beneath the layers of dust covering every available surface of the room, grandiose beauty awaited. This room might have been unused for years, but in its prime it would have shared the same exquisite details and beauty as the rest of the castle. Stonework made up three of the four walls, the other wall patterned with a gold embossed wallpaper. Baroque ceilings rose to a peak above me and left enough room for the curved arches of the four-poster bed. Large windows lay straight ahead, empty and black.

I inhaled a steady breath and wondered if the prince had any staff left to serve him. Those willing and able to bind themselves into the employ of a monster. If so, they would only bother with the rooms he used. There was no need for guest quarters when no guests came to stay.

Uncaring about the dust or my own grime-coated skin, I crossed to the bed and pulled back the counterpane. I shoved it to the foot of the bed, kicked off my boots, and crawled between the sheets, still wearing my filthy clothes.

Every fiber of me screamed that I'd made so many mistakes. I shouldn't have stopped for a rest in the woods. I should have gone all the way back home, ankle or no ankle. And I couldn't reconcile that feeling with the one I'd grasped earlier, the fleeting feeling of gratitude for being safe within these walls.

Only after I closed my eyes did I wonder if I should have locked the door against the beast roaming the halls.

CHAPTER 10



Silence greeted me when I woke the next morning. I turned toward the window, saw the first rays of morning sun, and for a moment I forgot where I was. There was only a feeling, a vague recollection of nightmares that slipped away the further I woke.

Should I have tried to sneak away again during the night? The thought ate at me. The longer I remained under the stale sheets, the more I tried to convince myself I did the right thing by staying.

Of course it was the right thing.

My ankle still ached and when I shifted it, wincing, I felt heat coming from the area. An infection I would have to keep an eye on to make sure it didn't worsen.

A knock at the door sounded and I jerked in the direction of the sound. "Hold on." My voice trembled, tension returning to my muscles and limbs. Uneasy, I coaxed my legs over the side of the bed, heading for the door with feet made of cement and a fierce limp due to the ankle. Finally, I had my hand on the doorknob though I had no clue who or what I'd find on the other side.

The breath I'd been holding released when I stared down at a tray of eggs, bacon, and fresh fruit. A glass vase held a single red rose to accompany the meal. The delicious aroma had saliva pooling instantly in my mouth.

Glancing up and down the hall, I saw no one.

"Thank you!" I said loudly. Then anxiously grabbed the tray and returned to the relative cocoon of safety the room had become overnight.

I shoveled food into my mouth without hesitation, like I'd never tasted anything so good in my life, and then with my stomach full I got to work.

Once I finished cleaning the room, removing years of accumulated dust, it was nothing short of a dream. Opulence such as I'd never imagined. The windows, once scrubbed, showed a clear view of the dead gardens and the tree limbs in desperate need of pruning after too many years of neglect and allowed to grow wild. They obscured the view of the valley beyond, and when I pushed the window open, a soft summer breeze drew out the remaining stuffy scent.

The room might have been designed for a guest, but to me it more suited a queen or an empress, with marble floor and old window dressings and tapestries of plush velvet and silk ropes. Once again, I felt the balance of power shift out of my grasp. I'd come here to Prince Merek's domain with the intention of saving him, as though I could miraculously snap my fingers and fix what I'd broken in the first place. Yet I had to rely on his hospitality to do it. His very grudging and reluctant hospitality.

The thought left a bitter taste in my mouth.

A few doors down I found a bathroom. The tub was large enough to be considered a small bathing pool, perfect for soaking, and the hot water worked beautifully. I stared at myself in the mirror, thinking about the stupidity of riding my horse into the night to help a man I couldn't remember, a man who might or might not be living in the castle beyond the vast medieval forest. A man who might or might not be glad to see me. And all this with only the clothes on my back. Did I think I'd have the problem solved before dawn?

I didn't know what I'd thought. The pressing need to right my wrong had guided me rather than logic, and now I wondered if borrowing some of the clothes I'd found in the wardrobe would be acceptable...or piss off the master of the castle.

After my bath and with nothing else to wear except my grubby clothing, I ended up grabbing a dress from the large mahogany wardrobe and slipping it down over my shoulders. Knowing I probably looked ridiculous. At least it fit me.

With no other choice, I left my hair undone and spilling down in loose curls. I gritted my teeth and swept into the hallway, determined not to be embarrassed. Swallowed against a burning in my throat at what I'd find with morning's light.

My appearance should be the least of my concerns, I told myself. I refused to feel intimidated. And I refused to play the victim any longer than I already had. At least he'd given me a nice place to sleep. *Far from him*, he'd said, but better than a cell in the dungeon.

Did the castle even have a dungeon? That thought should have given me heebie-jeebies, but somehow in the light of day, it just made me want to giggle. I was a guest here no matter what the owner of the castle thought of me. A guest with a purpose. I didn't know if the other people in the castle—if there *were* other people in the castle—would feel the same way about me that Merek did. Or how they would treat me going forward.

I hadn't barricaded the door against him during the night, either. I had nothing to fear from him, just as I had nothing to prove. I was there to help him, and slipping further into victimhood did nothing for anyone.

Standing up straight, I made my way downstairs, with the hem of the long old-fashioned dress leaving a trail in the dust behind. Through large dingy windows at the front of the castle I saw the rising sun cresting over the dense forest. The same forest I'd come through the day before. A strange hazy mist rolled along the tree tops and I knew that below was the village, probably glad to be rid of me. And here I stood in the castle, with the woods untouched by man and the disused roadways disappearing beneath new growth. An untamed wilderness with the prince now a king of this realm of isolation. The trees became massive and silent guards keeping all those in the castle confined to the grounds.

Not knowing what to do, I walked back toward the kitchen, determined to familiarize myself with the castle layout. Steeling my nerves along the way and smoothing down the front of the dress as I willed my hands not to shake.

I saw no one, no one who might be responsible for the breakfast I'd eaten and the beautiful rose now gracing the nightstand. However, when I walked past the formal dining room, I noticed a place setting had been laid at the head of the table along with a glass of what looked like orange juice.

Merek and I were not the only ones here, clearly, though I looked around but I still saw no one. For a heartbeat, I wondered where everyone had gone. Were they hiding?

Could I count on breakfast in my room every day? Or would I be expected to eat the rest of my daily meals with Merek? I moved past the dining room before anyone saw me.

I couldn't think in terms of staying here for any length of time. That wasn't the plan. My mother and brother must be frantic with worry by now. I must keep my focus on why I was here at all.

To find a way to reverse the curse I'd put on Prince Merek.

So I felt elated when my rambling led me to the library. Books! My old friends. I ran my fingers lovingly across the spines of a shelf of books, gazing about in wonder and admiration at the tall bookcases lining three walls of the large room. The fourth wall was all windows, letting in plenty of natural light for reading and research. My excitement grew by leaps and bounds as I perused a few of the titles. Perhaps here I could discover some hint or clue—

"What the devil are you doing in here?" Merek asked too quietly. So quietly that I still jumped as if he'd roared at me. "Tell me the truth and do not even think to lie to me. Unless you would rather me still believe your arrival here to be a mistake. Or better yet, physical proof that the universe is laughing at me. Are you not content with the rest of your lodgings?"

The towering shelves of books around us were silent, no doubt waiting to see what would be said between us, books clustered tightly together like soldiers in formation waiting for their next order. Their next assignment. The moment I'd walked through the door and found them it had felt like the sun finally poking through the dark clouds after a long storm.

Now the storm was back and it walked on two legs.

I waited for the tension to ease a little so that I could breathe, but that relief never came. Despite the spacious room and the bright sunlight glinting in through the grime-covered windows, I felt I needed to defend myself.

"My room is lovely, thank you. I found the library quite by accident, and I'm hoping to discover something that might jog my memory," I admitted, turning back to the shelves.

"Get out of this room. *Now.*"

I winced at the raw command in his voice. The voice of the high lord of the land, although he had not acted on the title in many years. On instinct, I turned to face him with my arms in front of me like a shield.

It made me wince to look at him but I forced my gaze to meet his. I had to believe his eyes were the same even though I remembered nothing about him when he'd been human.

"You never said I couldn't come to the library..." And why wouldn't he want me in here? Although I didn't know Merek personally—well, at least I knew him enough to profess my love to him in the past, obviously, so that wasn't entirely true, my mind reminded me—he didn't strike me as the type to be possessive over a room full of dusty books.

Clearly uneasy, Merek took a step forward and his toe claws clicked against the marble floor. "I didn't think I would have to watch where I walked for fear of running into you. It's been a long time since I've had to worry about another person, let alone a woman like you, and I find I do not care for the experience. Once again I will tell you, Miss Barnes, you should not be in this room."

For a monster, he was surprisingly light on his feet. And awkward around people, I knew right away, unwilling to make eye contact with me or carry on a conversation for more than a few grunted syllables at a time.

"I didn't realize I would need to ask permission for where I walked," I said, fighting the urge to jump into an immediate argument. "You only said I should not leave the castle, and as you can see I have not. I'm sorry if seeing me here took you by surprise but if there are places inside the castle you would rather I not go, then

you should have told me. I'm not sure how else you expect me to research cures for curses without use of a library, though. It makes my job much harder."

"These books," he said, pointing to the nearest shelf but basically indicating all of them, "belonged to my mother. No one has touched them since she passed away. They were her pride and joy."

The ache in those words had me sliding into one of the chairs nearby, shaking inside. "Your mother liked to read?"

Merek nodded. "She did. Most of the collections you see were brought here by her, for her pleasure. She spent her lifetime collecting anything she could get her hands on, acquiring many of these forgotten and cast-off tomes from attics, basements, and reputable sellers. My father often laughed at her folly while secretly supplying her with access to more precious books. This room holds what is virtually the last of her essence in this castle. You can understand why I am a bit protective of it."

"I would have liked her, I'm sure." I tried to offer up a smile, hope blooming in my chest. "Reading is my favorite hobby. I find it a way to escape from otherwise harsh realities, especially down in the village. In that respect perhaps your mother and I share something in common."

Wrong thing to say. "You are nothing like her," Merek snapped.

"I didn't say I was *like* her—"

"She was a kind and warm woman. Not some disgruntled witch who curses any man who wrongs her. Even one who wanted to marry her."

I tried to draw air into my lungs when each inhalation felt like swallowing glass. "What do you mean, marry?" A shiver shook me.

I lifted my gaze to meet his and saw a man with his face drawn into an angry scowl.

"Forget I said anything about it. I've done my best to block out the events of that night," he went on. "Perhaps my memories are unclear. It was a very harrowing time of my life. I must admit, though, by this point I should be used to it. It seems my past is made up of more mountains than not."

Sitting very still in the chair, I tried to internalize his words, to recall a memory that seemed to have vanished from my existence entirely. "But we must have known each other fairly well, if there was talk of marriage." My mouth went dry at the word.

A slow nod. "Yes. We did."

I could have sworn a low growl accompanied his words, and for a moment longer, Merek stood without wanting to elaborate.

But finally he said, "We were both young and didn't understand each other. I'm...sorry that you lost your memories. It would be a great help for you to recall the wording of the spell you used on me, and find a way to reverse it. I suppose I will have to grant you access to the library in this case, though it pains me."

He walked over and sat in the chair across from mine. No matter how he appeared outwardly, Merek always carried himself like a prince. A *king*. His posture remained dignified if not a little imposing, and in spite of the fangs and claws he remained proud.

"Did anything about that night stand out to you?" I pushed. Trying to get him to open up more when he clearly did not want to talk about it. "I ask not to bring up painful memories but to give me a better understanding of what magic I worked."

Merek worried the underside of his lip on his fangs. He didn't want to give in to his unnamed expectations. I understood how he felt, because if the positions were reversed, and the same person who cursed me showed up promising a cure they

might not be able to deliver, I would feel the same.

"Nothing much." He pinched his nose, breathing heavily. "Most of it is a blur to me. I did my best to block out the memory. There was too much emotional pain associated with it and the days following."

His voice remained low and raspy, slipping under my skin in a rich baritone that had the potential to take me under and drown me.

I turned to him, seeing the way he held himself, muscles stiff. "Perhaps you said something to me. Or did something that caused the spell to manifest in the manner it did. I don't know. I need your help to fill in the missing pieces. Was it...was it entirely my fault? Or did you play a part as well?"

Pure silence reigned for a moment and outside a stiff breeze had the limbs of trees in need of pruning tapping against the windows. I refused to let him intimidate me with his attitude and callous manners. He'd saved me in the woods, I reminded myself, and by allowing me to stay here, he'd accepted my help.

He *would* answer me.

"You can think what you want about me," he said after a long silence. "Your opinion is no longer my concern."

"I don't understand why you aren't telling me about that night. Is there something you wish to hide?"

Merek blinked, as though the action would clear the horrors of the recollection from his mind. "Because there is nothing *to* tell you. You've already seen the results of your actions." His face had gone cold. Like stone. And that unnerved me as much as seeing the way the claws at his fingertips curled over the arms of the chair. "What more do you need to know?"

"Everything," I insisted.

In my mind, it made no sense for him to keep the details of that night to himself, unless it was a way for him to test me, to see what kind of resolve I actually possessed toward freeing him from the curse. Or to see if I really had lost all my memories and wasn't just playing him for a fool yet again.

"I'm not allowing you to stay here in order to grill me," Merek stated sharply. An end to our conversation. "You're here as a means to an end, and the moment the curse is broken, you will be on your way. Out of my life once again. As swiftly as you entered it."

"You must believe I don't want you to suffer anymore."

"Then you should have listened to me that last night," he responded blandly and stood up.

"One more thing," I said before he could go.

Merek froze in position but did not turn around. "What is it?"

I rose and swiftly headed for one of the shelves, pulling out a volume I'd spotted earlier before he entered the room. "This book. It is one of my favorites and I lost my copy due to..." *An idiot with a huge ego*. "...unforeseen circumstances. Would it be all right if I borrowed this one?"

After a long pause I heard him sigh. "Do as you wish. It's not as if I've ever been able to stop you."

My head throbbed as I watched him leave. Getting information out of him was going to be like pulling teeth. But I had to keep trying. The more I knew, the more it might trigger my memories and give me access to the magic I knew I had. Or at least *had* had once upon a time. I must find a way to release this poor man from a curse I had inflicted upon him. Before it was too late.

It might already be too late. Merek didn't seem to care anymore.

Sunlight continued to illuminate the dust motes dancing in the air. Since Merek hadn't physically taken me out of the library, I decided to stay. To see what his mother's books might have for me in terms of answers. And hope he hadn't changed his mind about allowing me to remain here.

His future depended on me finding answers. Mine depended on his mercy.

CHAPTER 11



I spent all that day in the library, searching through the books for any kind of arcane subjects. Who knew where an answer might come from?

Luckily I found quite a few volumes with potential. But as the light began to fade, I decided to stack what I'd found on the table to be pored over tomorrow. Merek would probably highly disapprove and would rather I examine them one by one then replace them back to their original positions. Too bad. I had to do the research my own way.

By then the light was almost gone and my stomach was emitting embarrassing rumbling sounds. I hadn't eaten since breakfast. Was I supposed to find my own dinner in the kitchen? Whatever servants remained at the castle—if any—still hadn't made their presence known, but when I passed the formal dining room on my way to the kitchen I noticed the table set for two with elegant china and cutlery and crystal, though the lit candelabras offered little in terms of light.

It all looked too stately by far. And somehow too intimate.

I glanced down at the dress I'd donned that morning, now streaked with dust, and wondered if I was expected to change for dinner. Maybe there was something more appropriate inside my bedroom armoire. I wasn't fond of wearing dresses but I had little choice without returning to the town for my clothes.

Part of me squirmed at the thought. The prospect of returning to Bellmare and facing the stares of the townspeople—or worse, Gray and his ardent attention—sounded sickening. I decided I'd write a note to my mother and brother just to let them know I was all right. At least for now. Who knew how long this might take, or when Prince Merek might decide to throw me out or throw me in the dungeon forever. But at least I wanted Patricia and Thomas to know that I hadn't just vanished. Yet.

How to get that note delivered to them was the question. Would Merek even allow it? Savory aromas wafted to me from the various covered dishes on the sideboard. Surely Marek hadn't cooked all this himself. And I doubted he engaged a catering service. That thought made me smile, glad that I could still find some humor in the situation. Still, I thought, sobering again, this must mean there was at least one servant, and possibly more, no matter if they remained invisible. Perhaps I could persuade one of them to take a note to my mother.

I was parched, my throat dry from breathing in dust from the library. I spied a beautiful silver teapot on the dining table, a thin trickle of steam rising from the spout. Good. Still hot, still fresh. I took a seat and prepared to help myself, protocol be damned.

"You see," Merek said suddenly from behind me, startling me so much I nearly dropped the teapot, "life here is not as bad as people have made it out to be. I'm

sure you've heard rumors of the decadence and irregularities in this castle."

I steadied my hands and poured tea into a delicate porcelain teacup as he sat next to me at the head of the long table. I added a bit of sugar into the tea before taking a sip and letting the warm liquid glide down my throat. Apple and mint and a hint of spice I could not name. It had been a long time since I'd had a cup of tea quite this good, with the sort of rich and robust flavor only money could procure. I took another sip before answering him.

"I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"The people of Bellmare. I'm sure they have nothing but terrible things to say about me. About the castle and the servants who still work for me. Forced labor, you are no doubt thinking. But rest assured I pay them well." Merek shifted in his seat, his claws faintly tapping against the silver teapot as he poured himself a cup—an oddly elegant gesture.

Hmm. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he was concerned with what the townsfolk thought. With what *I* thought. "Actually, I haven't heard much at all. More than likely, considering I was responsible, most decided it was safer to keep me in the dark. I didn't even know whether you were living here or not. Whether you even *lived* or—" I broke off quickly, took another long sip, hoping it would lessen the sudden flush across my cheeks.

Merek watched my every movement, his eyes keen. His expression inscrutable. The beast missed nothing. "I admit I've taken a step back from ruling and being in public since...*this* happened. But the villagers silent? It makes no sense."

"I wasn't exactly well liked in town," I confessed. "I am not the type of person others would stop on the street and voice their opinions to or even stop for idle chitchat. More, I was the one they spoke about in hushed whispers or under their breath. I heard nothing about you until...until the day I came here to help."

He gave a low grunt. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. I am more surprised that you and I are seated together having dinner without wanting to kill each other." His scowl didn't lighten as he idly fiddled with the cuffs of his sleeves. "Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined such a scenario."

What I wouldn't give to see him crack a smile. I stifled a sigh, hoping I could find a way to reverse the curse soon. To give this man back his life.

My empty stomach took that moment to remind me, rather loudly and insistently, that I needed food. I clapped a hand to my belly, mortified, and hoped he hadn't heard it.

He gave no indication that he had. But two seconds later he turned his head and sniffed at the air in the direction of the sideboard. "Roast beef, I do believe. My, this *is* a special occasion." He rose and came behind my chair, pulling it gently back so I might rise. "Might I offer you—er... Please help yourself to anything you like." An arm out indicating the covered dishes and a swift, shallow bow were my invitation to provide for myself.

And yet there was something curiously tender about that. For all that he hated me for what I'd done to him, inherent good manners yet lingered beneath the beast-like exterior.

So he wasn't *completely* devoid of humanity. That gave me tremendous hope.

"You know," he said after we had both filled our plates and returned to the table, "perhaps the villagers' silence and indifference are for the best. They've allowed me to slip into the shadow of obscurity, which oddly enough brings with it a degree of dignity I lost the moment the spell turned me." A little shrug of those mighty shoulders. "Wishful thinking, at any rate. I'd have been a terrible ruler."

I found myself at a loss for words. What could I possibly say to him now? Although I was determined not to leave until I found a way to remove the curse, there was no guarantee. We could both be trapped here indefinitely. I wondered how he'd managed to carve out a somewhat normal life for himself despite these abnormal circumstances. I wondered what he'd done between the spellcasting until now. What he'd filled his days with while his people governed themselves.

"You aren't the least bit curious what they've done in your absence?" I asked him at last.

He scowled and growled. "Are you now going to lecture me on all the things I should have done instead of wallowing in self-pity?"

I swallowed a sip of tea and shook my head. "Not in the least. I am asking for your honest opinion."

"Hmm." Merek leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest, muscles bulging over the rough tunic someone must have knitted for him since his transformation. "May I admit something to you, Miss Barnes?"

I wasn't sure I'd ever get used to hearing my name coming from his misshapen lips. "By all means."

"You aren't the same person I remember."

That gave me a start. "What do you mean? I—" Then I snapped my mouth shut, waiting for him to continue.

"Your memory loss must have affected your personality in only the best way. Here we are, able to sit together through a polite dinner without a heated, passionate debate in which you lose your head. You are calm and collected and a little intimidated. I find the combination...intoxicating."

I gripped the handle of my teacup to keep from chucking it at him. Damn his smugness. "I love how you can sit there and mock me when you clearly have the upper hand in this situation. You remember everything and I nothing. It doesn't seem fair to me. And before you lecture me on fairness, know that I have already considered that before speaking just now."

I wanted information about my past and instead I got a personality comparison. Which at the moment was hardly helpful.

"You are a witch. Can't you spell yourself to remember?" Merek said tartly.

Oh yeah, sure, an easy way out. "No." I spoke through gritted teeth. "I can't, because if I could have, I would have done it by now. Clearly."

"What the hell do you mean?"

A small voice warned me to keep the information to myself, to not admit my vulnerability to him. I plunged ahead anyway. "My magic disappeared along with my memories." I tensed, waiting for a snide retort and hearing none. "I can do small things, most of the time without truly thinking about them, but I know no spells. If you asked me to levitate this table the odds are very good that I would fail miserably."

"You have no magic now?" he asked slowly, incredulously.

His gaze raked over me and I wanted to squirm in my chair. When I almost cracked the teacup, I set it back down on the table and folded my hands on my lap. A million questions raced through my mind, along with a million excuses that had no bearing in this situation. "None to speak of, at least."

"How interesting." Merek chuckled.

"What is?" I snapped.

"All this time I assumed you were lying to me." He took another sip of his tea, the tiny fragile cup looking incongruous in his massive paw. "I thought you were still playing the game you started when we first met. This strange cat-and-mouse

where we both try to gain the upper hand with extravagant statements, some true, some false. I felt this was the next step in your game where you thought to take advantage of me with fake ignorance. As though you wanted me to feel sorry for you.”

I was enough of a wreck at the moment without adding psychological games to the mix. “Why would I? I have nothing to hide from you,” I replied.

Merek finally relented. “You want to know about the first day we met? Fine. I rode in my carriage down through Bellmare on a goodwill trip, to see the town, to see the people. It was my first official trip to visit the people I would lead without either of my parents present. I’d been too busy being an irresponsible gadabout and it took me a long time to gather myself together, to acknowledge my responsibility. To prepare myself to one day receive the crown. The future king? Me?”

He almost scoffed at that and I clenched my fists in my lap, clinging to every word of his tale.

“At any rate,” he continued, “it was time I grew up. To have a real look at the kingdom I would one day inherit. As you no doubt realized, it is not a terribly far trip to Bellmare, though it was the last village I visited on my, shall we say, goodwill junket.” He twirled his fork around absently. “I found the town charming, the village green suitable, and the fountain in need of a good scrubbing. Then I saw you there in the square and you were so beautiful in your blue dress. So beautiful.”

My blood warmed as I reached again for the teacup, running my fingers idly along the rim lined with gold. “Blue dress? You remember even such small details?” I asked cautiously.

“Oh yes. I do. They are burned into my memory and impossible to forget. A blue dress, yes, evidently one you’d managed to save before the bank foreclosed and took possession of everything. I didn’t know about all of your family’s misfortunes until later when I made inquiries. At that moment, I only knew I was very much taken with your beauty. You were the most beautiful girl I’d ever seen. So beautiful,” he said and paused, his lips curling into a smirk at the end, “but cold. Cruel.”

“Cruel.” I went still.

“Yes. You are *still* beautiful. It is almost painful to look at you.” My breath caught at that. “Though I admit I don’t sense any of the coldness or cruelty.”

“And you never will,” I said vehemently.

Merek dropped the fork at last, staring at the tines and the wink of candlelight on the polished silver. “That remains to be seen, Miss Barnes. In any case, I bade my driver to stop and you approached the carriage without hesitation, as though it was you who commanded the town and not me. You who commanded the will of the people around you. We spoke briefly and I knew I would be back to visit Bellmare more often. In fact I returned the next day to find you. It didn’t take long for me to be hooked.”

I frowned. This didn’t sound like me at all. The missing years of my life...had I really been that person? It didn’t make sense. “Beauty fades,” I said at last, heart pounding, setting my teacup back on the table. “There’s no sense in letting a frozen heart lead you. That way lies only ruin.”

Our gazes met over the dinner spread and I peered into those eyes so like two great emeralds. They held a lot of grief yet very little of the antagonism I’d come to expect from him.

Merek turned aside, affected by the look. “If only you’d felt that way five years ago. You and the rest of the people in that wretched town.”

A protective instinct for those I didn't even know flowed through me. "Stop talking about the people you abandoned. You know nothing of their struggles," I demanded.

"You think I don't?" Nearly shaking now, Merek tightened his fists until I was sure his claws must be digging into his own palms. "You think I know nothing about the people I used to *lead*? You are the one who turned an ignorant eye to people in need. You, those savages, everyone. You chose to turn your back on me and those under my care."

"That's enough. I'm the one who came back for you."

A deep, cold chuckle was his answer. "Too little too late."

After a short internal debate on whether to toss the rest of my tea in his face, I decided not to, grateful he'd shared at least this much with me. Those few words spoke volumes.

I raised my chin, still defiant. "I choose not to let my past actions define who I am in the present. I choose to be a survivor and to work with the cards I have been dealt. What do you choose, Merek?"

Despite my stern words, I felt his despair. The stark emptiness of the years without hope he'd endured. A trace of pity burst to life inside of me and I quickly squashed it.

Pity wouldn't solve this problem. It would only complicate it.

"You confessed your desire to be with me," he admitted slowly, each word dragged from him as he continued his story, "early on, and I could not understand why, when we did not know each other. I didn't know who you were besides this pretty face in the crowd. Until I made inquiries about your background. Your father a merchant, not from any of the landed gentry, not associated with the prominent families, not a suitable match by any stretch. But I couldn't get you out of my mind, even knowing you were not worthy of me."

Worthy of him.

He went on, still not looking at me. Responding and yet lost in his memories too. "I was spoiled, profligate... What did I have to offer anyone besides my rank and social standing? That's what you wanted, I was sure. You were just another social climber with a pretty face. Until we grew to know each other. Until we grew closer and closer and I could not separate fact from fiction. To this day I am still unsure of you. I want to send you out of my sight but I know if I do, all is lost."

I tossed his own words back at him. "If only you'd felt that way five years ago."

Immediately, guilt stabbed at me as I was reminded of Merek's lost time. The years I'd taken away from him with my curse, robbed him of when I condemned him to this strange and monstrous half form.

He finally turned to look at me then. "You have no idea how I felt five years ago. Isn't that right? Because you say you have no memories."

I sensed the hatred radiating from him, reaching out for me. I tried in vain to remember any hint of why I might have fallen for him so hard, so fast, when the only thing I saw now was darkness. Darkness from his years in exile and isolation.

After a few moments, he pushed away from the table. "Enjoy the rest of your evening, Reila. And good luck with your research. I hope it begins to pay off *soon*."

The moment he left me, I resolutely walked out of the dining room and back to the library to continue my research, scouring through books in hopes I'd find something that might work.

I owed him that.

CHAPTER 12



I didn't want to consider this castle a prison, to myself or Merek or the invisible staff working here. But I felt eyes on me constantly. Eyes making sure I kept within acceptable yet unspoken limits without going out of bounds. Footsteps followed me although I was never fast enough to view the person they belonged to. Each time I turned around, the sound vanished, and I found myself alone.

Between research breaks in the library, I explored what I could of the interior of the castle, although most of it had fallen into such poor condition—whether a result of the curse or lack of available people to care for it—so I mostly stuck to the well-lit areas and never went lower than the main floor.

There were times where it felt like the black mood of the owner had seeped into the walls themselves, where sorrow branded every corner until it felt like a tomb. Cobwebs draped along windowsills, broken furniture, decaying fabrics, and the dark vaulted ceilings so high above that light never reached them.

I passed through more stone arches than I could count and found spiral staircases leading up to the second and third floors in the north and south wings of the castle, all accented by intricately blown glass sconces. The old monarchs spent their money frivolously, I thought, trailing my hand along the lines of one of those lights. They invested in details none but those cleaning the castle would see instead of letting the money flow down to benefit the people.

Bellmare may radiate comfort and class but I knew all too well of the people starving in the streets. They came to the library multiple times a week because the head librarian handed out whatever scraps of food she had left. Her sympathy was probably the same reason she'd hired me when no one else would.

Some of the extravagant features of the castle were welcome, however. My discovery of the castle atrium proved an unparalleled delight. Arms laden down with books, I stepped over the cracked threshold into a room of pure light. Though the windows needed a thorough cleaning and the potted plants had long since turned to desiccated stalks, I knew right away this was a good place. A place of peace and tranquility. A small set of iron steps led from the doorway into a sunken area with meandering paths leading toward a central fountain. No water now flowed through the pipes, and the stone was stained green from old algae.

How marvelous this place must have been in its prime. Stone walls gave way to glass panels rising in a circular dome overhead. A wave of humid air surrounded me and I instantly drew up the image of roses in my mind. Roses and other tropical flowers in full bloom, kept that way year-round by the patient and loving hands of the castle gardeners.

If this room were in peak condition, the goddess sculpture in the center of the fountain would be polished to a gleam, with water playing a tinkling tune as it splashed merrily. Winding paths would be tended throughout the sanctuary, with thick vines and small trees and secret ivy-covered alcoves providing escape. I imagined stealing away into one of those alcoves with a book in hand, hidden from the world and preparing for my true love to find me.

How fanciful! Yet how appealing! Closing my eyes, I let my imagination take wing, transforming the atrium from its current state of neglect into a wonderland. Yes, this would be a wonderful place. Once I managed to break the curse, I would beg the prince to let me have a hand in its restoration. Beg him to—

“I knew I might find you here today, Miss.”

I whirled around and dropped all but one of the books, holding it aloft like a weapon in front of me. But the voice somehow sounded familiar, and I noticed the young girl standing in the doorway I’d just vacated at the top of the steps. Honey-colored hair was wound around her head in a messy braid, fingers twitching at her sides. Her body posture added to the picture of youth; she couldn’t have been more than fifteen or sixteen years old and dressed in a plain brown dress with a white apron.

At once the pieces clicked together and I stared at her with a new sense of recognition.

“You’re the one who called to me as I attempted to escape,” I said on a slow exhale, trying to get my breath back from where she’d startled it out of me. “Are you also the one who leaves breakfast for me?”

With a shy smile she reached behind her to take up a tray and then took a careful step forward. “Yes, Miss. I thought you might be hungry. I wasn’t sure if His Highness would prefer you to dine with him. It seems he changes his mind frequently over the course of your time here. But I know we are all glad for the change. It’s been a long time since anyone has been allowed to visit.”

So my initial guess about a small army of invisible servants had proved correct. I stared at the young woman, lifting my brows when she looked at me expectantly. I wasn’t sure what she wanted me to say. Then I realized she was still holding the tray. I glanced around and located a small stone pedestal which would serve for a table.

“Will this do? I’m sorry, I don’t know—”

“Monique,” she supplied. “That’s my name, Miss. Monique Dupree.” She descended the short steps and deposited the tray onto the pedestal.

“Thank you for bringing me tea, then, Monique. I do appreciate the gesture. I’m Reila Barnes.”

She gave a tiny giggle at that. “Yes, Miss, I know.” She stood before me shyly, her hands clasped behind her back.

Grateful for the distraction, I laid the book aside and poured myself some tea. “You know me? Well, I suppose Merek—I mean *His Highness* must have mentioned it to all the staff. But how did you know to find me here?”

“This was your favorite place, Miss. Your favorite area of the entire castle.”

I frowned. “My...favorite place?”

“Oh yes. When you used to come to the castle for parties, or to visit the prince. It was always here where my mother and I found you to serve you tea and cookies and whatever else you wished.”

My blood went cold and I was glad for the warmth of the tea. “So you remember me from...from before?”

“Of course. The prince hired us especially to keep you happy and we are lucky he has allowed us to stay under his employ despite everything that has happened.” Her pretty smile turned down in a frown as she surveyed the atrium. “This was the first place he let die,” she said, and I couldn’t mistake the sadness in her tone. “Once the curse took hold, he expressly forbade anyone from coming here ever again.”

“And yet here you are, risking his wrath. Why?” I asked her. This girl had *known* me. And she’d kept her distance until now, unwilling to approach me.

“Because I felt it was time, Miss.” I stared dumbly at her, wishing I could remember but eager to hear what else she had to say. “I hope I haven’t offended you. It seemed safe to approach you.”

Her sudden appearance begged a waterfall of questions. Why did she and her mother stay in the beast’s employ, for one. Was it a sense of loyalty? Money? Or perhaps—and this thought really disturbed me—were the servants also under the spell? Were they trapped here like Merek?

And what did she mean by “safe to approach” me?

So many questions I didn’t even know where to begin. Neither of us said anything for the longest time and finally Monique dropped a hasty curtsy before bolting up the steps and out of sight.

My mission loomed ever more important. Once the curse was lifted, perhaps then I could find the answers I needed. No sense in wasting precious time with speculation. With tea at hand and any desire to explore more of the atrium effectively dashed, I settled down among my books and got to work.



“Have you found what you’re looking for, Miss?”

Monique’s reappearance surprised me. If anything, my senses had been attuned for Merek, wondering if the prince would follow me in here. To this place that had apparently meant much to me in the past.

One glance outside told me I’d been at it for too long. Time had slipped away and the sun was beginning to set through the trees. Even the tea was cold. I hadn’t noticed.

I turned back to the girl, with her honey-colored hair and bland expression on a face that would have been at home in any crowd in Bellmare. “Not yet. But I haven’t given up. Have you come for the tray?”

“A message, Miss. The prince has requested your presence in the west drawing room. He commands that you come immediately.”

“Commands! I saw the prince this morning and he seemed very content to not see me at all for the rest of the day. In fact, he specifically commended me for not making a nuisance of myself.” I couldn’t help the sarcastic twist of my lips, though perhaps I shouldn’t have said that, least of all to one of his servants. I made a show of snapping my books closed, my annoyance at being interrupted obvious.

Monique cleared her throat, opening and closing her mouth and twisting her fingers.

I took pity on her. “Inform the prince I shall join him shortly. After I’ve returned his precious books to the library.” I smiled at her. Pretending I didn’t feel butterflies in my stomach at the thought of Merek actually wanting my company.

Nonsense, my mind reminded me. He was steps away from tossing me out on my rump.

Monique scrunched her nose and when she addressed me again, it held none of the hint of awe I'd detected in her earlier tone. "You shouldn't keep him waiting. He will get angry."

I almost gave a huff of indignation but she hurried to add, "If he gets angry, then we...I...am afraid the progress he has made will be for nothing."

Was I the oddity in this place? I wondered. Had they grown accustomed to the face of the beast they'd once known as a man, so that anyone considered an outsider gave them cause for concern? And what on earth did she mean by *progress*?

"You may tell him I'm still working on a solution to his problem and that if he has anything he'd like to say to me, we will discuss it over dinner. I will be joining him there shortly." A quiet dismissal, done without raising my voice.

"I think," Monique reiterated in a low but firm tone, "it would be better for you to come with me at once. Please, Miss Barnes."

Would these games never end? I thought about arguing more but I jerked myself up out of the chair and saw the way she flinched at my sudden action. Saw the way this girl, this teenager, half turned away as if to flee, clutching the doorjamb as though she wished for a weapon to protect herself.

From me.

Whatever lingering thoughts I had were cut off as my blood turned to ice. The smile I worked to keep in place frayed at the edges and my muscles ached with the strain.

"Never mind, then. I will return to the books later. Thank you, Monique. Lead the way," I said as easily as I could.

I needed to remember, I thought as I walked a step or two behind her, that within these walls, Merek was not the monster.

I was.

CHAPTER 13



I exhaled a sigh, following Monique down the hallway. From the brief time we had spent together, I sensed her fear, her trepidation. Her *resentment* towards me. And although she was politeness itself, as was necessary in a servant, I'd gotten the distinct sensation my history with the girl hired to wait on me was not a pleasant one.

Perhaps not her solely, but all the staff within these strange castle walls.

Monique remained silent, her footsteps quick and her back hunched away from me, her shoulders stiff. A visible sign of her discomfort.

What had I done to the girl to cause such a reaction?

It wasn't long before she gestured toward a closed door and I reached to open it myself.

"Don't run, Miss," she said quickly, softly. "Whatever he says, whatever you do, please don't run away. He wouldn't be able to bear it again."

Her whispered plea might have been my imagination because when I turned around to thank her again, she'd disappeared. My heart jackknifed into my throat. This place got weirder and weirder by the hour. I opened the door and stood there a moment to survey my surroundings.

"Are you going to stand in the doorway for the rest of the day or are you going to come inside?"

The sharpness of Merek's voice snapped me to attention and I nodded. "Yes, I'm here."

I closed the door behind me and sealed us in the room together.

Despite the beautiful weather outside, someone had lit a cheery fire in the charred confines of the fireplace. The drawing room remained mostly intact, with a large desk across the far wall and various bookshelves. A *fleur-de-lis*-embellished table to my right held an onyx chess set, and ancient stag antlers decorated the wood paneling.

A *man's* room, most likely used for the king and his entourage after a day of hunting and sport. I glanced around but did not see Merek. More games?

"I'm not going to get anything accomplished if you bring me to heel like a dog whenever it strikes your fancy," I said tartly, crossing my arms to fight off the shaking of my insides. "I was quite busy with my books."

The energy in the room positively crackled, like static in the air before a thunderstorm. A slight movement caught my eye and I strained to see in the dim light. My heart gave an unexpected lurch at the sight of him in the shadows, standing still and silhouetted against the backdrop of a window. His brow creased as he took me in, lips twisted in a scowl of irritation. His hair-like fur had been brushed away from his face, giving an unimpeded view of the slight mongoloid

brow and protruding teeth.

"Did you have a chance to speak with Monique?" he asked.

His question took me by surprise. "The servant girl who called for me? Yes. She brought me tea earlier. I thanked her."

"Are you not curious? Don't you want to know why she is so afraid of you?" Merek rounded the desk with smooth, graceful movements.

My head pounded like someone was banging out a beat on the inside of it. "I'm not sure I do," I dodged. I was frightened, actually. Terrified of finding out the truth about myself. Or how I used to be, rather.

Merek glared at me. "The last time you were here she was only ten years old. You pushed her down the stairs in a fit of pique. Her leg was broken. It took months for the bone to heal because the doctors refused to attend her once they heard about the curse. Once they saw my *new* face for the first time. So you see your spiteful action against me affected more victims than just myself."

His words hit me square in the chest and broke something emotionally. "I can't believe it. I would never do that," I whispered. "I would never hurt a little girl!"

"But you did, Reila. And I'd wondered if you'd even bothered to speak to her since your return to our humble abode."

"No, I— She never showed herself to me until today." Well, that wasn't quite true, I thought, remembering how she'd tried to get my attention when I made my attempted escape.

Merek grunted. "You could have made yourself known to them, to the brave few who remained. You owe them that much at least."

I felt like I'd been slapped. "I *would* have, had any of them bothered to show their faces," I insisted. "I've been all over this castle and never once seen another living creature besides you."

Apparently, he didn't take kindly to me calling him a creature. An unfortunate choice of word but too late to take it back now. Merek stormed closer yet and I staggered away, finding myself trapped between him and the chess table like a hunted animal. My rear bumped against the wood and I heard chess pieces toppling.

I almost flinched as one of his knuckles grazed the side of my arm. As close to a caress as we would ever come.

"You've been quite comfortable here, have you not?"

The question summoned a wave of anxiety that prickled my skin. "I have, yes." I hoped it wasn't a loaded question. The room spun in circles around us as my stomach worked hard to settle.

He bent close to whisper on a ragged sigh, "Why did you really come here?"

"I—I told you, I w-want to find a way to—"

He rested his heavy brow against mine and I was astounded by it, not knowing whether to pull away or allow him the intimacy. I still didn't trust him, not really.

After a moment he straightened, to my relief, but the fury was back in his eyes. "With the spell came a solution, as you must remember. You gave me until my twenty-fifth birthday to find a way to break the curse, and you know damn well the days are ticking down and I am no closer to that solution. January will be here in a matter of months. So tell me why you came. Did you want to delight in my misery? Did you come here to gloat about the success of your curse? Is that the reason you drag your feet, stalling for time claiming to do research?"

"No. I came to help." I tried to sound strong. Stronger than I felt when the tremors in my body betrayed me.

Merek towered over me, staring down though he made sure not to touch me. Heat radiated from his chest. Something crossed his eyes for a split second—

affection? longing?—before he tamped it down. Snuffed it out. He hadn't been fast enough, however. I saw the emotion—the very *human* emotion—and it shook me.

“Why me?” He still sounded angry. “It is one of the many things I want to know yet find no answer for. Why me, Reila? What did I ever do to you except love you? And now here you are again and I need to know why.”

For some reason, I couldn't find my own anger. I shook my head and slid my fingers up his arms. Drawn to touch him although he'd told me not to, although he'd erected seemingly insurmountable barriers between us. Something inside me lurched forward, toward him, seeking...

“Because I can't walk away.”

He merely chuckled.

“What's so funny?”

“You walked away very quickly the last time I saw your face.” He stared at me as though I were repulsive to him. An insult just for standing there with him. “You left me in incredible pain on the steps of my own home.”

Goose bumps rose on my skin. Because I didn't just see the disgust he claimed in his eyes. I saw the ghost of something else along with it.

My heart fluttered, rising to beat against my ribs.

“Don't you dare look at me like that, Reila,” he burst out. “Don't you *dare*.”

“Look at you like what?”

One of his claws curled under my chin and lifted my face so that our gazes locked. I didn't wince. Somehow I knew he wouldn't hurt me. “Look at me like you still love me.”

I reached for his face then, to trace the patterns of his brows and the strong jut of his chin. Merek flinched, his groan sounding full of pain when he shook his shaggy head and stepped back, like he'd suddenly become painfully aware of how close we stood. And I was aware of the blood surging through my veins and how I had to take several deep breaths to gain control of myself. He did the same.

“Love,” I said softly. “Was that what we had?”

His eyes flashed, but I saw the flicker of hurt. “I'm not sure what you think you're doing, but you need to stop,” he urged on a growl and stepped back.

It seemed the more I drew toward him, the further away he pulled. And though he would never believe me, though he would always think me a liar, I saw the person beneath the mask of the monster. Beneath his every wicked smile.

The tears I'd yet to shed stung the backs of my eyes, clogged my throat. *Lord, grant me strength*. Because the eyes I looked up into belonged to a man.

A man I had once loved. And then destroyed.

“Merek,” I whispered. Willing my voice to soothe him. Willing his breath to be more regular, to get him to stop fighting against me.

He shook his head violently and the rest of him tensed. When he spoke, his tone was controlled if not a little rough. “Stop using your magic on me. I won't fall for it again.” But I heard it nonetheless, heard what he didn't say.

I won't fall for you again.

I approached him hesitantly, remembering the feeling of his skin. The softness of it beneath the layer of fur. Knowing I wanted more than anything to touch him again. “I told you before, I have no more magic. It's gone.”

His shoulders shook, as though I ravaged him with my words. Would my every move be suspect, for the rest of my life, because of the mistakes I'd made? Guilt spread through my veins like poison. Five long years...

When was the last time he'd been touched? By anyone?

A touch was a simple thing, something that most would take for granted. I'd taken it for granted my entire life, being able to reach out to hug my brother, to hug my mother. To be close to them when I needed comfort.

With my heart thumping against my ribs, I moved toward him again. "You're not a monster, Merek."

Though he further stiffened with distrust, he linked both arms over his chest, a defiant curl to his mouth. "If I must be one, then at least I am in good company."

That insult did the trick. I snapped out of whatever stupid empathetic trance I'd imagined myself to be in.

"Oh. Well, *fine*. If you want to continue to think me a wretched waste of a human being, then by all means do so."

There would be no getting through to him. Not today, anyway. I stared at him for a moment longer, fighting against the awareness of the way his body curved toward me, or the warmth of him wafting over me, carrying the enticing scents of forest and spice and exotic places.

Though part of me was very aware. Poised and ready to make a move should an opening occur. But I also knew I couldn't force it. He would not be pushed.

"And now if our business is concluded, I'm going to get back to reading and trying to find a way to help you." I swallowed hard and adjusted my shoulders back. Determined to ignore the headache swelling and growing between my temples. "I'll see you soon for dinner."

"For all I know you are reading for pleasure, to torment me, and you're no closer to a cure than the day you left," he called after me as I left the room.

I didn't take offense to it because I had a feeling we were both thinking about what had just transpired. And how I'd almost kissed him.

CHAPTER 14



Weeks passed and summer gave way to autumn. And when autumn turned to winter and I was no closer to finding a way to break the curse, tension rose to the point where if Merek and I made it through the day without getting into a screaming match, I considered it a win.

January would be upon us soon. Although I didn't remember the exact date of the prince's birthday—and was frankly too embarrassed to ask—the increased tension told me we did not have much longer. Which meant the day fast approached when my curse would become permanent.

I did my best to befriend Monique, despite the girl's continued wariness. Proving I was not—or at least *was no longer*—the evil witch she'd believed me to be hadn't been easy, but gradually we'd reached a peaceable coexistence. I even managed to get some letters sent off to my mother. Although the way back to my hometown was too hazardous going directly through the forest, as I had originally come, I soon learned that supplies came regularly via a different access from another nearby village, and so my letters would eventually reach Bellmare even if by a circuitous route. This gave me some comfort. My mother and brother must have been frantic with worry, since I'd now been away from home for months.

The castle servants must have decided among themselves, after my re-introduction with Monique, that they were comfortable enough with me to finally show their faces. Some, however, still displayed a distinct lack of trust. One of the servants who also did double duty as Merek's personal steward, a surly-faced elderly gentleman named Gustaf, took it upon himself to follow my movements from that point onward. And believe me, months of having him as a shadow did not improve my mood.

Besides Gustaf and the footmen there were Monique and her mother Marylynn, as well as the chef and his two assistants in the kitchen, and a handful of housemaids and scullery maids. Most still preferred to keep out of sight, and I rarely saw anyone actually doing anything, but since my arrival the castle had been cleaned and dusted and repaired where needed, making it altogether more comfortable and inhabitable, if not welcoming.

Research in the library still consumed my time, and although I hadn't yet found anything specific to my situation, I did find a number of volumes of old herbal remedies and potions. I'd been relying on finding something about magic and a spell to correct the original damage. Failing that, restoring my memories might help me unlock my own currently inaccessible knowledge. So it occurred to me that perhaps a potion might help. There might also be a potion to restore a cursed creature to its original form. Since we were running out of time, it certainly couldn't hurt to try.

So on one particular snowy day in December, I decided it was worth a shot and focused on ingredients I'd need for the most promising potion. And quickly learned that I'd need help with acquiring some of them.

I left the library, feeling more excited and hopeful than I had in a long time. Where would I find Merek at this time of day? Footsteps trailed mine, as usual. I whipped around.

"Gustaf, there is no need to follow me everywhere I go. I'm not trying to escape, but your constant spying certainly makes me consider it. Now go away. I have things to do today."

"Things that involve breaking the prince's curse," he replied. His accent colored the vowels and I knew he was not from Halsworthy originally. The distinctly different emphasis on syllables suggested somewhere farther north.

I tapped the side of my head. "There you are. You've finally gotten the idea."

He looked me up and down, clearly indifferent to how rude he was being. I'd fallen under his care for one reason only: I was here to help the prince. That was all he needed to know in order to make sure my basic needs were met. Though it remained painfully clear he did not trust me one iota.

"Now please point me in the direction of His Highness," I added.

His heavy brow wrinkled in disapproval, Gustaf led me down to one of the front parlors. I had my hand poised to knock on the door when I felt a touch at my back. Shifting around, I had a second to swallow my surprise before Gustaf had me pinned against the stone wall. I winced when my head bounced hard against it.

"You'll never be able to fix what you've done," he muttered.

The tone of his voice had frissons of alarm jolting through me and I wasn't sure if he was upset about my failure...or glad for it.

"Let go of me immediately." I kept my own tone at an equally low murmur. "Because you are surely aware of what I can do to you if you don't."

An empty threat, unfortunately. Though the old retainers and servants still considered me a witch, both Merek and I had kept that truth to ourselves. Gustaf didn't need to know about my lack of powers. Or the fear curling in my belly until my chest tightened in discomfort. Something warned me not to trust this man either way.

He merely grunted. I ducked under the steward's arms and pushed open the door to the study, strode briskly into the room and promptly shut the door behind me. Right in Gustaf's face.

But I couldn't escape the echo of his words and the confusing meaning behind them, unsure whether he'd meant to voice a warning to hurry—or a demand to cease.

A familiar twinge settled in my chest when I found Merek standing by the window, his broad shoulders drawing my attention immediately.

"Hello, you."

It had become our routine. As natural as breathing. We dined together at breakfast and dinner and he made sure to keep his conversation on a polite surface level. Pretended not to care about my progress and I continued to tell myself the blatant lie that I was closer than ever to a solution. The screaming matches usually came about later and paired nicely with whatever dessert the kitchen prepared.

"What is it?" Merek's barked question came accompanied with a crack of knuckles and shattered the silence between us.

I tipped my head in his direction. "I need your help today."

Merek slid incredulous eyes toward me, astounded that I'd tracked him down, asking for help. "You want *me* to do something for *you*?" he clarified. His words

dripped with sarcasm.

I hid my grin from him because I'd discovered something in my time here with him. Beneath the mockery and the threats, beneath the growls and grunts and distrust and cynicism, there lay a good man, one willing to engage in a tentative companionable relationship with me. I saw bits and pieces the more time we spent together, and I felt confident I would reveal the whole of him soon.

"Yes, I do," I affirmed. "I've found a recipe for a potion I want us to try. But I'll need your help to gather some of the ingredients."

I couldn't tell if that was a smile or a smirk; the former, I hoped. "I must admit it's been a delight seeing you so focused on helping me. You've been at it for months." He shook his head on a low laugh—did I detect sarcasm?—sweeping his paw along his hairline and clearly uncomfortable with the turn in our conversation.

Yes, *months* indeed. I hated hearing the word, and had pointedly avoided thinking about it though the windows showed the change in seasons. Despite the initial blow-up when I'd first arrived, Merek allowed me to continue using the library as my base of operations. He'd done his best to stay out of my way and instructed his staff to do the same unless I wished for something. "If you want it, and it is within his power to provide it, then you are to have it," Monique had told me one night. "Anything within his power, he said."

I still couldn't get the girl to open up to me much more than that, but the brief statement—indicating I'd become a priority—warmed me.

Snow had begun to fall two days ago and had not ceased, covering the world in a thick blanket of white. I hadn't stepped foot again outside the grounds since first coming to the castle. I missed Patricia and Thomas terribly, yet couldn't bring myself to go back. Not until I'd accomplished what I came here to do.

Though Merek and I may never be friends, I liked to consider us allies with a common goal. And love? Well, *that* thought might as well be banished out of my head entirely. *Love* remained an elusive concept consigned for family and the pages of fiction. After five years of living practically on our own, the two of us had a better chance of being struck by lightning than finding love.

Plus the man was a veritable pain in the ass, to be sure.

"Like I said, there are some ingredients I could not find in your pantry or stocks. But I think I saw them in the gardens and I would like some help in digging up the roots," I told him.

"You want to go outside? Now?" Merek turned to the window and the blanket of white covering the ground. "You can't be serious, Reila."

"I'm very serious, *Merek*."

"Out of the question. Explain your needs to a footman and whatever you require will be fetched."

I huffed in exasperation. His regal bearing and attitude could at times be so annoying. "No need for that. A little snow won't hurt us. Besides, I could use the fresh air."

His lips twisted. "Are you saying my home is *stuffy*?"

I knew him well enough by now to know he also still had a sense of humor, thank goodness. His humanity hadn't left him, no matter how his outward appearance had changed. It only reinforced my urgency to reverse the damage I'd done.

Before it was too late.

"Go and get your coat," I insisted. "*Please*."

He shook his head. "I don't need a coat. I have enough fur to keep me warm. You, on the other hand, will freeze wearing nothing but that dress. Where did you

find such an outfit, anyway? Surely it was not part of your wardrobe.”

“I borrowed this from Marylynn with the promise to mend it with magic before it is returned.” I gestured down to the scratchy wool. I’d made the promise easily. My memories remained elusive despite how hard I worked to bring them back. Whatever burnout I’d brought on myself, it seemed to be a wall I could not crash through. Despite that setback, my magic was returning slowly.

Nothing major yet. It started coming in spits and spurts, like being able to light a candle in my room without a match, then shifted to larger things. I could make doors open and close with a simple thought. I could swipe the dust off the floor and furniture and banish it out the window without the help of a dustpan and broom.

But the magic came too slowly and wasn’t enough. I wanted to go bigger, move on to stronger and more complicated spells. Only then would I have the power to undo what I’d done. Yet as desperate as I was, I knew better than to push myself before I was ready.

That could lead to even more disastrous results—which I didn’t even want to think about.

“Fine, then. If you will not be dissuaded by me or the weather, grab your overcoat and boots.” His hand moved to the small of my back and guided us both toward the door, Merek moving with regal grace for a creature his size.

I glanced at him, saw the reflection of sunlight off the snow bringing out the rich tones of black and red in his fur. I studied his face, monstrous yet, but beneath it...handsome in a captivating sort of way. It was almost like a trick of the light, two images juxtaposed, one human, one beast. How attractive he must have been once, although I hadn’t managed to find any paintings or pictures from before. Nor could I remember, more’s the pity.

I grabbed the coat I’d found in the old armoire and met Merek at the front door. The set of his jaw didn’t give me much hope we would actually accomplish much. But I breezed past him regardless, determined to try. “Come along. Let’s hustle,” I said. “The sooner we get the ingredients, the sooner I can mix this potion.”

I heard him growl, but it sounded more whiny than angry. “You want us to freeze to death.”

“You have enough fur to keep you warm, or so you plainly told me,” I said with a grin. “I’m the one who is going to get frostbite.”

“Well, why don’t you *spell* yourself so you stay warm?” he replied testily.

I clamped my lips together tight to avoid saying something I’d regret. “You’re in a surprisingly good mood today,” I said instead as I wrapped a scarf around my neck.

Merek dropped his eyes to mine and a riot of emotions raced across his face. “Am I not allowed to try to make the best of a bad situation? Or would you rather I spend my time grooming myself?”

My mind conjured up the image of a cat with one leg in the air and its tongue poised for a lick. I half stifled a laugh, then gasped. “You’re teasing me.” I blinked at the realization.

He gazed down at me, impossibly long black lashes sweeping over his eyes. “I know I’m normally a grump.”

“*Normally*? I haven’t seen you any *other* way,” I found myself saying, and hated that I felt the need to voice the opinion. Even though it was the truth. Mostly.

Merek turned away from me and blazed a path through the snow and across the courtyard. “Let’s go find your blasted roots.” He inclined his head toward the garden ruins, buried now under the snow but with a few dry stalks poking up here and there. I followed in the trail he was leaving behind him, my feet already

freezing inside my thin boots.

"Do you honestly think that I would show you my true self?" he said after a long moment. "No matter how you seem to have changed? I ask you not to be mean but as a true question."

His words held an enormous amount of bitterness but also a sincere desire to know my answer. To see how much I truly *had* changed, I realized with a start, and because he wasn't quite sure anymore of how I would react.

I nodded, my bones already stiffening because of the cold. "I'd like to hope these last few months have convinced you to place at least a little trust in me. And I'm determined to earn your complete trust," I told him.

"Don't get your hopes up on that, little one."

My face warmed and I said, "I'll change your mind, I know it. Now stop right here. Roots of a rose—that's one of the components of the potion. I'm pretty sure I saw some rose bushes here when I first arrived."

He lifted a brow and when he spoke his voice carried a note of steel. "You remember the rose bushes but not—"

"Yes." I hurried to cut him off. "I remember the rose bushes because I saw them when I dragged you home that first evening. Now use those claws for a good purpose and help me dig. You will be my human shovel today, and make sure you don't do any permanent damage to the plants. We'd like them to bloom in the spring."

He shot me a look. "*We*?"

I flushed. "Ah...er...well, what I meant was...who *wouldn't* enjoy seeing roses in bloom?" Dropping to my knees, I bent my head to hide my sudden shyness and began to push away the snow as Merek huffed out a low chuckle. I waited for some scathing retort.

But he just bent down next to me and began to dig. Close enough for my throat to tighten as he closed the distance between us. Close enough for me to watch the breeze rustling his dark fur and causing the strands to blow out to all sides like a lion's mane.

I admonished myself for staring again. What was wrong with me? It was like *I'd* been the one to live alone all these years without proper companionship or interactions with polite society. In all honesty, despite his sometimes callous words and the way his temper flared at inopportune moments, Merek had fared much better than I had.

I'd been living in books, in a fantasy world where the shadow of reality lurked, and although I wanted the full view, I'd never brought myself to face it head on. I'd waited for an answer to my own riddle while the rest of my life passed me by, without ever knowing why.

At least he knew why. At least he had his memories.

Detachment no longer worked for me, though I had used it rigorously my first few months with him, tried to consider myself as only an outsider looking in. I could no longer deny the truth even if it was a matter of survival.

"Thank you," I whispered, my voice little more than a quaver. "I don't remember if I said it before, but thank you."

He gave a low grunt. "This is your attempt to atone for what you did to me. How can I not do all I can to ensure it's successful?" His lips quirked and I knew that despite the humor he tried to summon, he felt none of it.

"I know I've let you down," I said slowly. "I know you think all this time I've spent with you nothing but a waste."

He shook his head. "I didn't have any expectations from you to begin with. It was all I could do not to throttle you where you stood, but too fascinated to see what your next move would be," he admitted.

Okay, maybe I deserved that. But maybe... "Maybe you enjoy seeing me struggling to find the answers to questions I cannot even begin to fathom. Maybe you resent me for what I did to you and want to make me squirm."

"Both of those things are true."

I puffed out a breath, creating a small cloud of steam. "Good thing I don't seek out your approval."

Merek chuckled and knelt closer until I could feel the heat of his body. It was much-needed warmth. "It's good to see you have a fiery spirit underneath those layers of cruel ice, Re—"

He didn't get to finish because I launched a snowball at his face, hardly thinking about the repercussions.

His brow furrowed after the ball hit him squarely between the eyes. He leaned back on his haunches, his claws slowly curling as he took me in, though he couldn't quite stifle his smile. "Do you want to try that again?" he asked.

A wave of heat coursed through my blood. Like a wave of *me* finally returning after a long vacation. I held out my palm and the snow formed itself into a perfectly round ball in my hand. A small hint of my former magic but one I did not take for granted now.

"Yes, I *do* want to try it again."

The snowball struck him in the shoulder this time. Merek's claws loosened for only a moment before he scooped up his own snowball and sent it flying at my face.

I reacted on instinct, diving away to avoid a direct hit. "Watch out! You could have caused serious damage, sir," I squawked.

"Oh no, you asked for this. Now you must take what you have so readily doled out for me."

The next snowball jettisoned toward me and I didn't have time to move before it hit squarely between my breasts with enough force to knock the air out of my lungs. I fell back, my hand pressed to the area as Merek stood over me, his broad form blocking out the sunlight. Flakes of snow cascaded down from his head.

"Come on, Reila, let me see what you've got. You think you can take me? You think you can win this fight?" he teased, beckoning me to get up.

A swish of my hand had a small wall of snow surging toward him and soon Merek was splayed on his back with the groan of an old man. He unceremoniously rolled over, coating himself with snow as he sent another snowball toward me.

His final shot hit me somewhere near my collarbone, causing the snowball to explode and shower my face. I lay flat on my back, spitting snow from my mouth, and he crawled closer to me until we both wound up lying on our backs with our faces turned to the overcast sky, both covered in snow. His gaze flicked over me and suddenly he laughed.

"I didn't think you had it in you," he said and let out a deep chuckle. When I turned to look at him, an amused glint was sparkling in his eyes. I relaxed at the sight. Softened toward him, *warmed* toward him no matter how the rest of me froze.

"You're laughing at me, aren't you? You'd better stop it or there's another snowball headed your way," I joked. "A big one with your name on it."

"I'm laughing at you, yes, because for a moment I forgot where we were. I forgot *who* you were. After everything that happened—" Merek still refused to mention the specifics of that night. "Well, I think we can agree that a little bit of fun was in order. You owed me that at least."

I winced, wanting to say I owed him nothing. And everything. But neither was true and we both knew that. "Shall I repay you in laughter, then?"

He grinned. "I just...never expected to feel like this again," he admitted frankly.

The two of us shared a shy glance and my heart somersaulted. "Well, now that's just *sad*," I teased.

He shook his head. "Since the curse made me into this creature, I felt like my joy had been ripped away. I no longer enjoyed being alive. But finally, *finally*, there's a light at the end of the tunnel."

He gave a shrug, and as he did so his fingers brushed mine and I saw a flash of images from his past and heard sounds of guttural cries wrenching him awake in pitch blackness. Ice-cold limbs, breath misted in front of him, tears that seemed to draw the blood from his body. Screams of agony from the heart—and I was overwhelmed to the point where my skin crawled as I tore myself out of the memories. *His* memories.

A sob threatened to break free of the clog in my throat.

His eyes darkened. "Maybe you aren't my enemy."

I swallowed hard, fighting back the emotions. "I never wanted to be your enemy." I struggled to rise, to keep me from doing what I wanted to do. To keep me from being pulled to him. I fought to stay focused on the current reality instead of the disjointed memories I'd received from Merek.

His warm paw shot out to grasp my arm. "Reila?"

"No matter what you might think about me," I asserted, near to tears, "I am not your enemy."

He leaned up on his elbow, his face grave. "I want to believe that," he said softly, looking me right in the eyes.

I glanced away. If I got lost in those eyes, I'd never find my way back. "Merek, I'm going to find a way to fix this."

"You keep telling me so. You're doing a damn good job of making me believe it, too."

"Liar," I purred, trying to lighten the suddenly heavy mood. "You're only saying that so I don't hit you in the face with another snowball."

"True. Keep it up, Miss Barnes, and at the end of this..."

At the end of this...what? We'd be friends? I highly doubted finding a way to break the spell would forge any sort of relationship between us. No matter what my past self once felt about him, and no matter what my current self had begun to feel, I feared the damage had already been done.

"Why did you never leave the castle?" I wanted to know. "To find a way to break the curse, I mean. Didn't you even try?"

He turned his face away from me. "You told me then that only a kiss of true love would fix my fate. Do you really expect me to find a woman to love me... looking like *this*?" He waved a hand to indicate his gruesome outer appearance.

The admittance hit home and I struggled to process it. "I don't remember saying that, so...I don't know. Perhaps. You still have the heart of a man."

"But not a good one," he said plainly.

"You didn't even *try*?" I pushed.

"This is my home. This castle has been the seat of power for my family for generations. Where would I go?" He sighed in resignation. "Besides, it is not easy to relearn a lifetime of having things handed to you on a silver spoon. Of having women throw themselves at you because of your wealth and status, only to find that nothing you do is good enough if you do not have a handsome face as well."

“Merek, you know that is not true.” I wanted to whisper words of comfort to him, to ease the knots of tension visible in his arms and shoulders.

“Isn’t it? It has taken me a long time to realize it, as well. Now.” He knocked against me with his elbow. “Enough of that. It’s good to know you don’t expect me to coddle you anymore.”

“I’m not delicate and in need of protection,” I argued with a shiver. The snow was making me very cold again. “I simply need to find a way to get my memories back.”

“So where do we start?”

“We start with getting the rose root and then move on to the next ingredient on the list. Before you decide to hate me again.”

Something predatory crept over his expression. But Merek went back to digging and soon unearthed a clump of frozen roots in frozen dirt. And I couldn’t shake the explosive unbidden memories of his first few cursed months from my head. How he’d tucked himself into his bed, shaking, jerking like a beast, fighting the unknown demons he’d suddenly come face to face with. His entire life changed in seconds.

I trembled as the ghosts of the past crept closer and his frantic sobs echoed in my ears, taking their own sweet time to fade away at last.

When we were done gathering the ingredients I needed for the potion, we moved back into the castle. The book I’d found in the library with the resurrection potion recipe waited for me in the old atrium. I’d set up my necessary supplies there because of the abundance of natural light but also because no one used it anymore. No one dared come near “the witch.”

Resurrection? Right. As if I believed the words on the page would help resurrect what was lost. Whether my memories—and with them a way to break the curse that didn’t involve true love’s kiss—or the man Merek used to be before being turned into a beast. Either would be a win, I reckoned.

The book had been a lucky find, packed among similar dusty tomes in a neglected section of the library. Whatever his mother had done with the books I didn’t know, but I’d recognized the power in them. Power I would hopefully be able to harness if I did each step correctly.

By the time Merek joined me, my mind felt like I’d run it over with a bulldozer and I flinched as he approached, my jangled nerves failing to alert me to his presence until he stood over me.

“How is it going?” Hot breath tickled my ear.

“Slowly. I’m...not sure I’m doing things right.” I gestured to the basket of ingredients we’d gathered. Most of them had already been combined. “I think it’s been a long time since I’ve done anything like this. I don’t remember anything about being a witch.”

“Your instincts have to be there somewhere,” he said.

“You would think so.” I paused, staring down at the copper pot I’d borrowed from the kitchen and the brown mess inside. “None of this feels natural. It feels like I’m forcing something out of me, something I do not want to give. Besides the giant blank spot, everything about my magic has been wiped from my memory, too. I can recall the color and shape of the dress I wore to a ball my father threw when I turned ten but nothing about being a witch.”

“Do not try to test me. If you are purposely keeping things from me—”

“You think I am?” I scowled at him and linked my fingers together in an attempt to overcome the urge to slap him. Whatever semblance of peace we’d shared moments ago faded away and now I found my temples throbbing with the threat of a migraine. “I’m doing my best.”

“Then make it work. Make it work, or else.”

“I am not the type of person who keeps things to herself for sport,” I argued.

He stalked slowly away as though he didn’t want to startle me with big, booming steps. “Unfortunately, Miss Barnes, that is where you are wrong.”

CHAPTER 15



I was too drained to argue with him. Thankfully he didn't press it and left me in peace.

Formulating the potion properly, to the best of my abilities, took the last of the strength the snowball fight hadn't sapped. I *had* to make this work. The light was waning now. No time left. Finally I gauged the potion to be ready, and I poured the concoction into a small vial I'd found in my scavenging. Then I took vial and book back to the library, lighting a few candles to chase the increasing gloom.

By the end of the evening, after the sun tucked itself behind the mountains for the day, I heard the heavy footsteps of the prince as he dragged himself out of his tower room to check on my progress.

His hulking shadow crawled toward me in the gloom of the library. *Please don't let me feel his memories again...*

I would not be able to handle another episode. Though I hoped it heralded some kind of return of my powers, a tender part of me knew my heart would break to feel his anguish again. To know he'd hidden himself away watching the years crawl by without a shred of hope to lighten the shadows.

"You've come for the potion?" I asked.

"You have it ready? And you're confident it will work?"

I lifted my chin higher to meet his eyes, feeling utterly exposed. "This isn't easy for me, you know. No matter who I used to be, the magic isn't mine to wield anymore. Not really, not completely. I'm doing the best I can with the meager resources available to me. Just so you understand that. I have no idea whether the potion will work or not."

He nodded. "Understood. I'm still surprised you found anything."

I knew he meant the potion book. Expelling a breath, I flashed him a smile then said, "It was a stroke of good luck. Your mother had a vast collection. This particular potion looked promising because it is called 'Resurrection'. Maybe if we can return you back to human form, it doesn't matter that I don't have my memories. I'm fine the way I am."

Wasn't I? Or had I said it more for my benefit than for his?

I handed the vial to Merek. "Here. This is for you. To show you what a dazzlingly good cook I really am. I mean, who knows! You might want to hire me on to work in your kitchens after this. Your head chef may have a need for my skills."

Merek jerked back. "I didn't realize you expected *me* to drink this...garbage." His nostrils flared at the smell, eyes closing on a wince.

"It's not going to kill you."

"Is that a guarantee?"

"Well...no. No guarantees, sorry. Look, I'm not sure what you expected. Did you want to bathe in it, instead?" I teased.

"Perhaps that would be better than *drinking* it, but I don't believe there is a bathtub in the castle large enough for me."

Merek held my gaze for a moment longer. Another joke! And here I thought I'd seen it all.

"But if it *does* work...what will you do then?" I asked as I waited for him to make up his mind whether to drink the vial of hideous liquid or not. "Once the spell lifts, I mean. I'm sure you have some kind of...plan."

It took him a long moment to answer. "I hadn't given it a thought." He cocked his head to the side and his mouth tightened. "I'd given up."

"Given up hope?"

"Given up *everything*. Your curse ripped through me and changed the course of my life in seconds. Turned me into this creature that could not trust himself to be around others without harming them. I did my best to figure out how to break it, but could find no answers. How could I? How could I get others to trust me when I could not trust myself? No, there would be no way to break the curse, and knowing that, hope fled. After everything that happened, I knew I would be nothing but a monster to any and all. For the rest of my days." He held the vial up in a mock toast. "*Salud!*"

Merek downed the entirety of the potion in one swallow and grimaced, his sharp teeth on full display. "This is *awful*." Gagging, he managed to keep it down.

"I promise I'm a much better cook than this," I told him with a straight face.

Merek set the glass vial down, still grimacing with distaste. "Now what? I don't feel any different."

I sighed and closed the spell book. "Now we wait to see what happens."



I slept fitfully that night, anxious to see what the outcome would be, to see if the ancient recipe I'd found in the dusty old book would turn the Beast back into the Crown Prince. Back into a man. Nightmares kept me tossing and turning, and when I finally cracked my eyes open, still groggy, the sheets were soaked with sweat. I took a moment to look inward, but found that nothing inside of me stirred in response to the magic I'd supposedly cast.

Why not, I wondered, staring up at the coffered ceiling. Why, in all these months of being here, wouldn't my magic return to me in full? Especially now that I knew more about it.

My mind went quiet in a cold anxious agony over what I might find when I stepped out of this room. Whether I would find things the same or entirely changed.

The only thing I knew for certain was that *I* had changed. I was no longer the cruel witch who had condemned a man to torture, imprisoned in his own castle.

My mother and father had raised me to be responsible. To care for the people around me, to make sure to protect my brother. Apparently, there were yet many things they hadn't gotten around to teaching me. Or perhaps those were banished from my memory as well.

Worrying my lip, I snuggled deeper beneath the covers, dragging them close to my chin. I was stalling, not ready yet to face the aftermath. My parents certainly never taught me how to navigate my personal feelings in a healthy manner. Such as

the fact that I was coming to care for Merek despite everything that had transpired between us. He loathed me. I knew that. He saw me as a cruel monster, as hideous as the one he saw when he looked in the mirror, yet I couldn't stop myself from caring about him.

I looked forward to our daily arguments because I knew then at least he dropped the mask. Over dinner we allowed each other to see who we really were and the conversations grew in depth and complexity.

I rolled onto my side and heaved out a long groan. I must have been *ridiculously* naive when I decided to come here, thinking I'd have this issue solved in a few days. A week at most. I'd been a guest in the castle for over four months now and Merek's birthday fast approached. Like a giant guillotine poised over my neck—over *his* neck—and as the days passed the rope frayed a little more, a little more. Soon it would come slicing down and all would be lost.

How many times must I repeat that I was no longer the vile person I'd been then? So many things I might have done differently if only I'd known better.

I waited for the sun to rise, glad for the windows granting me a view of the golden mountains, the air bright and cold though I ached to return to sleep.

I started to slide out of bed when the door to my room exploded inward.

"*Reila!*"

The raw force in Merek's voice had me acting on instinct, ducking down with my hair obscuring my face and my arms over my head for protection. Only when he remained silent did I lift my gaze to him.

And my heart sank.

He stood in the doorway, wearing the tattered remnants of his usual hunter-green tunic, claw marks having shredded the fabric from elbow to shoulder. Those claws were out and the fur covering his arms seemed to have grown longer. His face remained unchanged.

"It didn't work," he growled. "Your potion. Look at me. I'm still...well, you can see for yourself."

"It didn't work?" I repeated stupidly.

And why *would* it work? A part of me voiced the question while the rest of me shied away from the answer. After so many years of not knowing what I could do, not knowing who I was, how could I expect any magic to do what I asked of it?

"I should have known better than to allow myself to hope," Merek said dejectedly. "I am ridiculously foolish."

I rose from the bed and crossed to stand within swiping distance without fear of reprisal. "I don't want to hear you say such things about yourself. You are not foolish. We are simply exhausting all avenues which present themselves. It is not foolish to hope for the best outcome."

He sighed with resignation. "There is only one avenue left."

"What is that?" I asked.

"True love."

The words hit me with two resounding clunks. I ached to hold him, to reach out and assure him that I would be there for him whatever would happen, and that even if we lost, I was here.

But I kept it to myself, detaching from him and everything else around me, including my own terrible desires. I would scour books, clean the castle, sit in the winter-frozen garden, and think of any way I could to make this life better for the both of us.

He was...a conundrum, I decided, at times confident and cocky and at other times withdrawn. Angry through it all but not without his moments of joy. I'd seen

as much with our snowball fight. I'd gotten used to his formidable energy and these days I felt him before I saw his physical self.

He cracked a smile that somehow didn't seem nearly as ferocious as the first time I'd seen it. It was an attempt at humor that fell short of the mark, because I could detect the ocean of sadness behind it. "I was merely joking again. We all know true love isn't possible."

He looked and sounded beaten, and I pitied him even more. *Something* should have happened with the potion. It made no sense for Merek to remain unaffected. Yet here he stood, still in beast form, revealing his fears to me.

I might have been an ambitious bitch when I cursed him—I was still having a hard time with that, though—but I knew myself better than anyone. I would have left a loophole in the spell, if possible. A way out. It only made sense, right? I couldn't have been so heartless, so evil. There had to be a way around the wording of the curse, if only I could remember.

"Don't give up hope. I'm going to find a way."

I watched his face grow cold, so cold and so calm that it unnerved me.

"We will *never* break this curse—"

I held up a hand to stop him, inches away from his lips. Slowly I withdrew my hand. "I'm not going to stop looking until I find it. Maybe it isn't clear to you by now, although it should be, that I am here for the long haul. Keeping you entertained has become my new favorite hobby."

"And here I thought it was reading."

"I read for pleasure *and* for business," I said somberly.

His gaze dropped to the open, untied front of my nightgown and my face warmed. "Pretty soon, Reila, you will want to return home to your family. You will decide that being here with me does nothing to help you or your plans for future happiness." He looked me up and down. Assessing me. Weighing what to say. "You will want to leave and I will remain behind, making the best of this situation the way I have done for the past five years."

"I told you I would stay until I've freed you," I insisted, at once annoyed at his pessimism. "You don't get to decide how I feel or how I will act."

He frowned at me. "Say what you will. I know your type. You're content to help me as long as it serves your goals. If you can't find a way to break me free, to assuage your own sense of guilt, then you'll run away and you will try to forget."

"You think so little of me even now."

I halted on my way past him, looking down at the elbow Merek had grabbed to keep me in place. I didn't know how to process this. How to process my own rage and the sadness inside of him.

He stood that way for a long moment and I wondered if we'd been in this position before, once, when the world had been at his feet and he'd been unafraid to look in the mirror. Once when there was an endless string of possibilities for his life, for my life, for *our* life.

"Prove me wrong," he said softly. "Prove me wrong and then we will see."

He tried hard to appear unaffected, tried hard to keep the hurt from his voice though I knew it to be genuine. I noticed the frown tugging at the corner of his mouth and knew he felt I'd let him down on purpose.

"It will be my pleasure."

I pulled my arm out of his grasp and reached for a robe I'd found in the wardrobe. No time to dress properly. My research must continue. I owed it to him. "Maybe I got the recipe wrong. Or the wrong ingredients. I don't know, but I won't give up trying," I told him as I headed for the door. "Have a little faith. Please."

If I wanted an apology out of him for his lack of faith, then I'd be waiting a long time. He still thought I played him for a fool.

I'm the fool.

I strode down the staircase toward the library, and whatever servants thought to stop and speak to me moved swiftly out of the way. I tried to concentrate on what I could do to find a new spell, a new potion, a new piece of magic to work. My tumultuous emotions hissed at me and all demanded to be noticed.

Not likely. I was on a mission.

I returned to the library to pore over more books, more literature on magic and arcane subjects. Maybe there was something I might have missed. I'd take whatever sliver of knowledge I could get, whatever I might have overlooked that would give me an edge.

It took several more days of Merek avoiding me, several more days of hunting through the vast volumes for anything I might have overlooked before, and finally I stumbled upon a book on "black magic." While it went against every grain of my soul to peruse the contents, I could not dismiss it out of hand just because it related to harmful curses.

The very first page held a caveat. A warning.

Curses cannot be undone once they are cast. They must be broken.

I sat for the longest time staring out the window at the snow, the harsh, bitter laugh dying in my throat. *They must be broken...* but how? I didn't remember what I'd done, and Merek didn't seem to want to speak to me about it. No one did.

True love's kiss? That didn't exist. And even if it did, he would never...

With me...

I locked eyes with my reflection in the window glass, noticing the tense set of my lips, the look in my eyes like I'd been slapped. The last bit of my composure unraveled.

Instead of telling Merek, knowing it would not do a bit of good, I kept the information to myself.

CHAPTER 16



Strains of a piano echoed distantly in my mind. Groaning, I rolled over in bed, positive the sounds came from a dream. The melody seduced me, the song achingly familiar. Something just out of reach but one I'd heard before, long ago.

The enchanting chords sank deep beneath my skin and caressed me with a sensual wave of heat. From the lowest notes to the high tinkling melodies, whoever played showed a range and depth of emotion I'd never heard, and one I would never be privy to again.

I shook sleep from me and pushed up onto my elbows. Darkness danced outside the window as a distant snow storm grew closer, smothering the bright light of dawn.

I stretched, determined to follow the song, slipping on a robe and slippers before exiting the room.

My heart grew heavy the longer I listened.

"Hello?" I called out into the hall.

No answer, although I didn't expect one. I walked downstairs following the sound, following the passion I heard in it.

My breath caught when I crossed into the front parlor and saw Merek hunched over the keys. He was playing a delicate melody I recognized but could not fully recall.

Something drew me forward. Drew me toward him and the small bit of empty space on the bench next to him. I marveled at how, despite the fur-covered paws and retracted claws, the prince mastered the keys as though he'd been playing the piano most of his life. His eyes were closed and I knew he had lost himself in the melody.

I narrowly resisted brushing the fur away from his collar though I ached to run my fingers there, to feel the silky heft of those strands. He wore one of the only pieces of clothing large enough to fit his muscular frame, a tan linen shirt with strings at the neck.

Merek didn't bother grumbling out a good morning as I sat and watched him play. I closed my own eyes, relishing the melody. And without thinking, I added my own fingers to the keys. The song coursed through me, my body knowing the notes, knowing exactly what to do.

When had I learned to play the piano?

With the snow outside and the fireplace roaring, the two of us made music together, toiling over the keys in tandem. I wondered how I knew this song, and if Merek had been the one to teach it to me. The gap in my recollections did not stop me from keeping time with him. Nor from pouring out my soul onto those keys.

At once my failures over the last few months didn't matter anymore. Nor did the lack of sleep or the fact that I'd taken to eating in the library while I worked. The music swept me away until we reached the crescendo together, the last notes trailing off into silence.

My heart nearly cracked open.

The two of us sat for a moment longer before I spoke. "How do I know that song?" I asked finally.

A spark of compassion entered his green eyes and Merek's voice softened when he said, "There was a time...the two of us used to play it. Whenever we were upset with each other, instead of getting into a fight—although there were plenty of those anyway—we both decided to pour ourselves into the music. Hoping it would soothe out the tangles in our emotions which words simply could not do."

His statement shook me. His green eyes held me captive, breathless. I stood on the edge of a cliff ready to throw myself over with delight.

Vulnerable and exposed and raw.

"What do you mean we used to play it together?"

Merek exhaled and shut the cover over the keys, shaking his head. "You and I know each other a bit better than I've led you to believe, Reila. There are some things that have been too painful for me to address. About you, about us. About myself."

"I don't understand." I sat still, my shoulders squared and my heart beginning to beat a quick tempo. "You never told me. You made it seem as though...as though meeting me had been a mistake, as though my coming here and cursing you was unexpected. *How deeply did we know each other?*"

Merek stood quickly and pushed away from the piano, the legs of the bench screeching against the floor in protest. "This was our song. Okay? One we made up together in our darkest hours, an outpouring of our feelings. So why would I talk to you about it now? It's not something I care to remember. Sometimes a pain that deep is better left in the past."

And yet he'd been playing it when I woke. Not so much in the past, then, but something still impacting the present. "Our song," I repeated, hugging my arms around my midsection on a shiver. Wishing I could remember...

Merek never seemed to be in a place to satisfy my desire to know, and I dreaded pushing him for fear it would decimate the progress we'd made with one another. I wanted to know what had happened to *us*, since there was apparently more to the story than what I'd been led to believe.

"You should have told me." I clasped the edges of my robe together, watching the steady fall of snow outside. The sconces on the walls did little to keep the darkness at bay, and had the fire not been stoked to such great heights the room would be tossed into near blackness.

His avoidance made it harder for me to detach with each passing day. I didn't want him to disappear from me, to act like I shouldn't be here anymore. I didn't want him to act like a happily-ever-after was impossible...

Merek's hands fisted at his sides. "What was I supposed to say to you? That you and I were together in the physical sense? That we spent more time in each other's company than we did apart? It was a long time ago and a ridiculous mistake I prefer not to remember. Besides, you would have laughed at me." He shook his head. "You would have taken one look at my face and thought me stupid."

Now it made sense, the perfumes in the room where I slept, the dresses in the armoire that just happened to fit me perfectly, the necklaces and jewels and robe and slippers. My unease deepened as things clicked into place. *My room, and a*

terrible window into a past I didn't recall.

"But...what about me?" I asked.

"What *about* you? It's none of your business."

My face tightened. "Oh, right. It's none of my business and I should try to ignore what happened in the past, sweep it under the rug. Great idea. I will simply pretend an entire portion of my life with you doesn't exist, like the rest of the world does with this place."

"No one cares what you think, Reila." Merek sighed, and I wondered if he ever grew tired of the same untrue repetition. *He* cared. Deeply.

"Yes, exactly." I chuckled dryly. "Especially since I can't seem to find an answer to the curse. It makes me entirely useless and another mouth to feed, nothing more. It certainly does not make me an ally or a woman to be trusted. No one cares about my voice because it comes from *me*."

Despite the size of the room, the walls closed in on me, the space shrinking around us until it was just me and Merek and the piano.

He staggered forward and my skin prickled at the size of him, though I was no longer afraid. "I didn't ask you to be here, or to be given an easy out," Merek said, his syllables deep and echoing. The voice of a prince. A king.

I refused to be cowed. "And yet there is clearly more going on here than you've been willing to tell me. Enough that you and I had a song. *Our* song."

"Forget it. There is nothing more to say."

"I think there is plenty more to say. It sounds like...*we* were in love." I offered him a faint smile to soften the statement. The rightness of it resounded through me.

"Love?" He scoffed. "No. *People* are incapable of love." His shoulders hunched as he strode out of the room, refusing to meet my eyes and leaving me alone.

Moments later the castle's front doors slammed. I winced at the sound but knew I wouldn't have been able to stop him or keep him from the only escape he had left to him. He would crash through the snow and into the forest to brood, to get himself under control, and I would be waiting for him when he returned.

What was going on? I didn't even remember learning to play the piano. Yet I must have sat here, with Merek, at some point in our past.

I'd been waiting for him to make a move, waiting for him or somebody to fill in the gaps in my memories. And now it seemed painfully clear that no one was going to step up. Not my mother, not Merek, not the staff.

I shoved away from the piano and out of the room, still in my nightgown and robe. Better to leave His Highness miserable and alone. Stepping into the hallway, I dragged a hand through my hair and went exploring, feeling bold. Bolder than I'd been since my first few weeks there.

If Merek had something to hide about our shared past, then I would find it. Damn him.

Gloom shrouded the hallways and it was sheer instinct to want to turn around and run in the opposite direction. But a timid explorer never found anything worthwhile, I reminded myself.

Although I'd inspected them many times before, perhaps I'd overlooked something in the myriad rooms of this vast castle. The first few rooms I looked in still held nothing but the broken remnants of furniture and cobwebs. There were shadowed corners, dust, and heartache, as though the rooms themselves had absorbed the attitudes of all who still lived in the castle.

I made it through the first floor having found nothing. Certainly nothing that would give me a clue about my past with Merek.

Shaking my head, I pulled myself up the stairs, and instead of taking a left to get to my own room, I went right. *Far away from me*, he'd once said. Maybe it was time for me to close that distance once and for all.

How could I break the curse over someone determined not to want help? Determined to wallow in his own self-pity and storm off in a fit of rage rather than sit down and have a constructive conversation?

Merek was the most infuriating man I'd ever met. Part of me wondered if I'd always felt that way—probably not—or if I'd known about some redeeming quality that made the rest of his faults fade away.

At the moment, all I could do was try. I would try to understand him, and where he came from. Try to understand this place and the staff lurking around like ghosts. Try to understand how I fit into everything and what I could do to change the story.

"Follow..."

A whisper of sound echoed off the stone walls of the hallway and I turned in a circle, but saw nothing, no one. My imagination, surely. And then in the relative gloom I saw a delicate shimmer ahead of me. Light from somewhere bouncing off something shiny, no doubt. I was about to dismiss it when it pulsed and shimmered again, and then suddenly darted away.

What the heck was that?

Curious, I hurried in that direction, along the labyrinthine corridors. There were many more rooms than I remembered seeing on my first exploration of the castle, and if I hadn't caught another glimpse of that tiny shimmering *something* I might have gotten lost. Almost assuredly.

I wandered after the fleeting mirage, feeling foolish but curious. Probably just some kind of insect that had gotten inside the castle. And yet my instinct was telling me not to dismiss it. A word came to my mind, an attempt to make sense of what I'd seen: will-o'-the-wisp. It almost seemed...*intelligent* as it teased me to follow.

So I continued on, catching another glimpse whenever I had to choose right or left, up or down. Now I felt convinced that it was leading me somewhere. No clue whether that would be a good thing or a bad thing, yet I couldn't stop myself. I couldn't force myself to turn around and flee back to the familiarity of my room. I had to know.

There was so much more to the castle than I'd previously guessed. Most doors were steadfastly closed, but a few were open. I passed by unused parlors and dusty storage spaces, peering into each as I hurried on.

Around another corner. And then I didn't see it anymore. My feet stopped in front of a heavy door carved with the same insignia as the royal seal. Somehow, I knew this was where I needed to be. But for what reason?

The door wasn't locked but it was heavy and resisted when I tried to push it open. It took all of my might to shove it aside with enough space for me to slip into the room. Unexpectedly, a whoosh of magic left me, lighting the sconces on the walls to fill the room with a soft buttery glow.

Another drawing room, I presumed, but none like I'd seen before. This one somehow remained entirely untouched by the years, by the wrath of the Beast who had rampaged through the castle and destroyed the contents of most of the rooms.

Save this one.

I wondered why. Maybe it was his father's old office or something. It was obvious from how difficult the door was to open that no one had been in here in a very long time. There were elegant furnishings, a desk and tables and chairs and sofas and knick-knacks, all without a spot of dust, all looking as if they'd just been polished, though the very air itself felt aged, as if this room had been sealed air-tight

at one point and never entered again. I saw a pair of glass doors leading out onto what would surely be a sunlit terrace overlooking the gardens in the summer months. And on the walls...

On the walls were pictures. Portraits. What I'd been desperate to see since coming here, that would hopefully give me an inkling into the past.

I moved deeper into the room, the door remaining open behind me, though I had no reason to be frightened here. That shimmering whatever-it-was had led me here, I just knew it.

Still, my skin prickled and the fine hairs on my arms stood to attention. It may not be fear—I'd come to understand that Merek would never hurt me—but a feeling he would not have liked my finding this room.

The first picture I came to was a painted portrait showing a king and queen in regal poses. I recognized the same green of Merek's eyes in the queen—his mother?—a serious-looking woman with unsmiling lips and hands folded primly in her lap. The king, however, looked like the type of man who laughed easily. Who led his people with heart instead of an iron fist. A golden crown decorated with rubies peeked out from the wild strands of his hair, while her crown was smaller but no less elaborate.

Stepping down the line, I moved to the next portrait and there I saw a baby in fancy trappings, in a fancy but elegant crib, captured during sleep. I crept closer to examine the dark lashes against cheeks like a porcelain doll's, tiny Cupid's-bow mouth slightly pursed, the little hands clenched into miniature fists even as he dreamed.

Merek Lyndon in the first months of his life?

Blood drained from my face when I approached the next portrait, as large as the first and miraculously intact. I expected otherwise the moment I recognized the two people there, each captured in heart-aching detail. I saw the wind-tossed curls, pale cheeks, an unblinking gaze filled with confidence and...coldness.

I saw *myself* standing next to Merek, who had one arm wrapped around my waist, holding me possessively to him. I saw him human.

The faces in the painting struck me in the gut. Hard.

I reached out to touch the Merek I saw in the painting. My heart pounded a frantic beat and I clasped my other hand to my chest as though it would relieve the ache. My head spun.

It was him. And it was me. It was the two of us standing together. A raw, shattered feeling overtook me. His presence, his essence, practically rose from the portrait and although I knew he did not stand there with me physically now, we'd stood there before.

"Reila..."

A shudder wracked through me and I leaned slowly toward the picture. Catching a small glimpse into the past through a dark riot of emotions as I lost my present self.

CHAPTER 17



The flashback took me under like the wave of an ocean, ripping me out of my current state and catapulting me into the past. I flew backwards, sideways, into a vacuum until the force of the trance popped me out onto the other side. In the room I now slept in upstairs, except the light from the chandelier overhead cast golden shadows on a luxurious space where everything gleamed brand new. The finishes shimmered, the wood polished to such a point where I might have seen my reflection if I bent down.

I was me but not me, my consciousness settling into the body of the woman I'd been five years ago. And I had a feeling the only reason I stayed aware of this through the experience was because of my magic. Tiny though it was, it kept me grounded so that I was experiencing my former self while I was *aware* of doing it.

Something was off. The smirk I shot myself in the full-length mirror didn't look *or* feel right. I wanted to gasp in shock as I stared at my reflection. The woman in the mirror looked beautiful, yes. And displeased. Quite displeased and yet stoking that displeasure. As though the essence of her displeasure would manifest into the world as a physical, palpable force.

My hands went to my sides and pressed against the silken fabric of the gown I wore, deep midnight-blue with gold filament threaded through in intricate designs, with a nipped-in waist and generous folds down to my ankles. A good amount of skin showed near my shoulders and chest. Whoever had helped me dress had also done my hair for me and the reddish curls shone with reflected light. They clustered around my face, fell down past my collarbone toward the immodest cleavage. Gloves matching the color of my gown adorned my forearms up to my elbows, the right one secured with a gold bracelet set with a huge blue sapphire.

Looking at my image felt suffocating.

"You are a vision, Miss Reila. A true vision."

An elderly woman with sleek gray hair approached me cautiously, her hands laden with an assortment of jewels for me to choose from. The memory felt familiar, a life I'd lived that I knew nothing about in my current reality. Yet I was still the outsider, the observer.

"Those are all you could manage?" I asked her, my words cold and dangerous, lashing out of my vocal cords like arrows from a bow. "You expect me to believe you tried your hardest to find the best gems to complement my look this evening?"

"These are part of the kingdom's collection of crown jewels, dear," the old lady hurried to say. "They are nothing to turn up your nose or scoff at."

Mrs. Nettles, my sudden recollection supplied. Mrs. Nettles had been personally selected among the palace staff to attend me. The woman hated me. I realized it with a start only now, looking back. And if I scrutinized her expression in the

mirror, I could see it on her face as well.

Had my merchant father survived, his fortune might have secured gems of the same quality for me, for my coming-out ball. The thought floated through my subconscious before disappearing. Hers, not mine. The Reila Barnes of the past, dressed for the ball.

"These were the best I could do on short notice," Mrs. Nettles replied easily. She settled the selection on the vanity in front of me. "You and the prince called for the grand ball without proper time to prepare—"

"It's up to you and the rest of the staff to get it done, and of course that is what we expect," I cut her off. *That is what I expect.* "Now leave them with me and I'll be down in a moment."

Crown jewels. They glittered up at me in an unparalleled assortment of riches the people below could never hope to match. And by below, I meant the people at the ball, because no matter that my family's fortune had disappeared with my father's death, I did not consider myself on the same level as the regular folk who called Bellmare home.

No, I was above even the Matthews clan. Above their haughty and deliciously attractive son, Gray.

Ugh, disgusting! This suddenly felt like an amusement ride I desperately wanted to get off of.

"Would you like help putting on your shoes?" Mrs. Nettles asked from the door.

She was just trying to be helpful, Current Me argued, quite embarrassed by the way this woman waited on me literally hand and foot. She must be paid handsomely to do it because otherwise she would not be in the room. That much was evident from her body language and clear as day if Past Me had bothered to look at her. Maybe I hadn't cared.

"I am quite capable of putting on my own shoes, Mrs. Nettles," I said with no small amount of pique. "I have been doing it without aid since I turned two."

I dismissed her with a slight wave of my hand, turning back to the mirror.

I stared at myself as though I were a goddess who had agreed to grace the mortal world with my presence. Curling auburn hair accented the cool sharpness of my blue eyes, the same color as the jewel on my wrist, my skin luminescent and somewhat pale.

I tried to find some kind of redeeming quality for Past Me, coming up blank the longer I stared. *We* stared. It was hard to imagine the person in the mirror as me. I'd gone so long without my memories that being smack dab in the middle of one felt like peeping in on another person's life, something I shouldn't be seeing.

I do not belong here.

Yet it was me, clearly. And although it felt awkward, it felt right. Power glistened beneath my skin, all the magic I'd since lost. Magic I could at that time call to do my bidding with the barest wisp of thought, magic strong enough to down a tree in a single stroke. Strong enough to topple buildings.

The Grand Ball had been my idea, I now knew, to celebrate what I'd hoped would be an engagement announcement to Prince Merek of Halsworthy. An engagement that hadn't manifested yet because he was dragging his feet proposing to me.

I was unable to fathom any reason why he might be putting off marriage with me. We had been through much together since our first meeting in the town square, when I caught sight of him in his carriage and felt my breath ripped from me. His good looks captured my heart, his royal station cemented the feeling, and his humor drew me deeper.

I came from a wealthy family, after all. We weren't gentry, nor nobility. My father had been a successful merchant, and the *haut ton* never accepted that anyone in trade could be worthwhile society. But wealth could make up for a lot of faults, and while we might have lost some of it when my father passed away—*most* of it, actually—in my mind that didn't take away from the fact that I considered myself a suitable match for the Crown Prince of Halsworthy—and thus worthy of soon becoming Queen Reila when the king died and Merek would ascend to the throne. It was a thrilling expectation and filled me with satisfaction that I would be the one to restore my impoverished family to its rightful place.

We haven't yet moved into the cottage. We are still in the process of figuring out what assets are left to us and which ones belong to the bank. We are staying at the tavern in town while things settle. With a flash of excitement I realized some memories were beginning to return to me.

The impending poverty didn't take away the fact that I had the knowledge and the power to move among the cream of society and fit into Merek's world. It didn't change the fact that the moment I'd seen him, I'd loved him. Loved him with the fiery passion of a woman who knew how to get what she wanted, knew she *deserved* what she wanted.

We were a pair built of flames and stardust.

I saw all of this in the flashback and more, my mind taking me back through the night of the Grand Ball as though I'd become one with a reel of film.

I moved away from the mirror at last, selecting an assortment of jewelry I deemed adequate and slipping on a pair of gold-detailed high heels that added an extra few inches to my slender frame. Now I would stand nearly as tall as the prince, with whom I normally came to shoulder height.

At last satisfied with my appearance, I slipped out of the room and down the main staircase toward the ballroom, toward the noise and the life and the celebration waiting for me.

For *me*.

A celebration of the fact that I would soon land the most eligible bachelor in the kingdom and solidify our union in the eyes of the people.

A prince. The future king. And I hadn't had to use my magic power to do it, although it might have made the courtship a little easier. He hadn't exactly been easy to convince of the sincerity of my intentions. In fact, he'd always seemed to be a step or two—or four—behind me in terms of desire. Not physical desire, no. We'd never exactly *lacked* in that aspect.

But he seemed in no hurry to marry. He'd been an indulged royal for so long, enjoying anything and everything his exalted position afforded. While I had an eye on the future, it was true, nothing could take away from how I felt for him. I was madly in love with him.

I made my grand entrance as planned, basking under the warmth of the overhead crystal chandeliers and the applause from the attendees. Merek separated from the crowd and came forward to claim me, looking like an angel carved from stone. He was so handsome in his courtly costume, his bright eyes glinting under the brilliance of the chandeliers. Tonight, he wore perfectly tailored dress pants and a jacket set in the same navy and gold tones as my dress. We were complements to each other. The perfect match.

Current Me could hardly believe what I was seeing. *This* was the Beast? The man I had cursed to his own hell? He was gorgeous! How could I have—

And then I realized there was more. The darkness in his soul was a perfect mirror to mine, and our faults reflected back on one another the same as our merits.

My prince held out a hand for me to take. I placed my palm in his and he reached up with his free hand to push a lock of hair off my shoulder, running the strands between his fingers.

"You look wonderful tonight," he murmured. "I expected nothing less from you but you have dazzled me."

"I feel the same, Your Highness."

The applause died down and I allowed him to lead me toward the dance floor. The twelve-piece orchestra struck up a lively melody and Merek took charge of the waltz. Our movements flowed together seamlessly. All eyes were on us and I relished the attention. The feeling of his hand on mine, his arm around my waist, his body pressed close.

Our breaths and heartbeats matched in perfect synch with one another, the pressure of his chest against the swell of mine as he dipped me, guiding me around the dance floor. Merek put the rest of the men in attendance to shame. Emerald eyes captured mine, accented by the soft wave of his gleaming chestnut hair. I squeezed his shoulder with my free hand.

Oh yes, we knew each other well. I felt the hunger radiating from him as he pulled me closer, the heat enfolding me in a slow sizzle. My body responded to him instantaneously. His hand grazed the side of my breast and brought blood rising to the surface in an alarmingly fast reaction. I wanted to lean close and whisper in his ear all the things I planned to do to him once we were alone. Wanted to listen to his silky baritone voice saying the same things to me. He always managed to undress me with his words before claiming my body completely. One of the many things I appreciated about him.

Merek leaned closer to press his lips to the skin at the base of my neck. "Later I should like to have a moment alone with you," he murmured. "There are private matters for the two of us to discuss."

Heat pooled in my lower abdomen. "Whatever you wish, my prince."

A lock of hair draped seductively across his forehead and I licked my lips. His arms pinned me in place for a moment before releasing me after the dance to mingle with guests.

There were many guests in the castle I'd never seen before and I wisely divided my time between them. Offering a smile to some and a kind word to others. I wanted them to like me, to accept my suitability for Prince Merek.

But time went by and I hadn't seen a glimpse of Merek since our dance. When the company of others grew boring, I made my exit from the party, leaving the music and laughter behind me. Let the others enjoy the extravaganza. They were there for a party and by God we would give them one to remember.

Next to the excitement of the ballroom, the rest of the castle corridors felt heavy with their silence. My footsteps resounded back to me.

"Merek?" I called out.

When no one answered me, I went toward his favorite room: the rear study with wide windows overlooking the valley below. It gave him a view of everything he considered to be his realm once his parents died and he inherited everything.

And soon, it would be mine too.

I couldn't help the sliver of pleasure I felt at the thought. Though I loved Merek with the whole of my heart, I knew it wasn't the only reason I'd been drawn to him. Power became its own currency, and although I possessed magic I knew this strategic marriage would secure a future for Thomas and my mother in a legitimate way. If I had the respect of the kingdom and the authority of the crown, I could do anything I wished.

Shadows deepened and the air felt cooler the farther I walked away from the ballroom.

I approached the closed door. Our special spot, the small office overlooking the gardens which his father had once used as his own personal space. We used it now for our own escapes. Sometimes, even in a castle of this size, one needed privacy, to remain hidden from the prying eyes of the staff and the ever-present courtiers. Though the atrium remained my clear favorite, this too held a special place in my heart.

My cheeks warmed. That's where Merek had gone, I was sure of it.

"Are you in there?" I called out. Without waiting for an answer, I pushed inside the room. Inside his *manly* domain. Though family portraits and photographs lined the walls, and hefty masculine furniture created comfortable spots for conducting the kingdom's business, I knew Merek preferred to relax in the large leather chair behind the desk, gazing into the fire across from him.

But that wasn't the picture I found when I entered. Not even close.

I froze at the sight of the man I loved with his arms around another woman and their lips fused together. His powerful hands were on her bare arms, while her fingers burrowed into the silk of his hair.

No.

It couldn't be.

"Reila!"

Merek broke his hold on the woman and drew apart from her in an instant. I didn't recognize her. I didn't *need* to recognize her. The desire to fight rose up and I marched toward them, a storm brewing inside of me. No one was allowed to touch him or hold him the way I did. A ripping sensation tore through me, pain invading my body at the sight of them together.

"Why?" I screeched, holding out an unsteady finger to point at the vixen. "Why would you do something like this to me?"

Fury and hurt raged for supremacy and I went with the first because it felt easier to embrace the fire than try to be reasonable. I tasted blood in my mouth.

"It's not what you think," he hastened to say. He took a large step away from the woman, his hands out to me, pleading, placating. "This isn't my doing."

I barely heard him speaking above the pounding of my heart. "Isn't that what they all say? Try to cover up their mistake by casting the blame on the other person. Making it seem as though it is all in the victim's mind," I shouted.

Merek hung his head, abashed. "My love, I am simply trying to tell you the truth. Lady Sinclair followed me from the ballroom. It was not my intention to entertain her though I did not wish to be rude."

The woman—*Lady Sinclair*—no doubt unwilling to be in the middle of this, slunk past me and it was only my focus on the prince that kept me from turning her into something small and squishable.

And I could do it, if I wanted to.

I seethed as Merek poured himself a snifter of brandy and rested his arm on the mantel. "She was the one who kissed me," he explained, downing the drink in a single gulp. "I had no part in it."

"No part? So those weren't your lips attached to hers?" I saw red. "What were the two of you doing here in the first place? You left the party ages ago and I have not seen you since. Because you were here, with some whore throwing herself at you."

"Please don't call her that." He sounded half confused and I had to wonder whose side he was on. Certainly not mine. "She made a mistake, yes, but I don't

believe her to be a whore.”

I found his response disappointing and ridiculous. He’d disrespected my love. He’d chosen to dally with another woman on the night of what I thought was our impending engagement. And oh yeah, was this the reason why he’d wanted time alone with me later? To tell me he’d found a replacement for me in his heart? To warm his bed? My insides began to sizzle, magic crackling in the air. “How could you do this to me?”

“Sweetheart, I didn’t do anything! She followed me. I will admit that I perhaps wasn’t as adamant about the inappropriateness of it as I should have been, but she is a distant cousin. A relative. I couldn’t be impolite to her. Until she kissed me I didn’t suspect she had a motive for seeking to be alone with me. She isn’t the first to attempt to engage my attention, hoping for a match, an alliance. But none of them knew my heart is already given. To you. I swear I would never cheat on you. Never.” He took a step forward, halted when he saw the sparks flying around my fingertips as I raised my hand.

I didn’t want to hear any of it. Not anymore. “I should have known you wouldn’t be faithful to me. You’re just a despicable playboy and you’ll never change. You never loved me.”

“Now that isn’t fair. To my dying breath, I am yours, and I have made it painfully clear to you on multiple occasions—”

“Not fair?” My eyes bulged. “You think it is not fair of me to call you out when I saw you with my own eyes?” Darkness crept toward the edges of my vision and from deep inside of me came a feral howling without end. A power I could not control. “I will not be humiliated,” I insisted, gritting my teeth.

I gathered up the skirts of my gown, whirled on my heels, and stalked out of the room, my spine ramrod straight. Tears of anguish burned my eyes as I strode toward my own room in the castle. A scream rose in my throat and I stifled it down, shoved it so far down inside of me that it lodged and became a part of me. My pulse hammered in my temples, my chest. Hard enough to shred my insides as I struggled to draw power to me.

Disoriented, panicked at the thought of losing the only man I’d ever loved, something irresistible pushed me toward an outcome I knew would not be good.

Oh honey, no. Don’t lose yourself. Stay strong!

Watching the scene now, through *her* eyes, felt surreal. As though I’d plunged deep into a dream with no way of waking up again. Although seeing it now with my own eyes, through hers, I was convinced Merek had been telling the truth. No doubt every eligible female took her chance with him. The reward for the winner was great indeed.

But at that time I’d felt gutted. Betrayed. I’d been mad to think it would work between Merek and myself. A man of his stature, of his good looks, would always have women throwing themselves at him. And I would forever be different from them all.

Just as I was different now from the foolish girl I’d been then.

She—*I?*—would make him pay, make him suffer to make up for the wretched sadness that consumed body and soul.

Think of what this will do to you. Think of your family. Think of Thomas being bullied at school. Don’t do this!

My whole body shook as the power of my magic swelled higher and higher, and by the time I made my way back to the ballroom, I’d made up my mind how to punish him so that no woman would ever want him again. I found him in the crowd, talking quietly with his parents, and I don’t know if it was the sudden hush as

everyone turned to stare at me that drew his attention, but he looked at me with such a sorrowful expression that I almost had a change of heart.

Almost.

“I will not be humiliated!” I screamed again, and focusing all my power I unleashed the curse.

And when it was done, when Merek transformed into a monster right before my eyes, I then cursed myself. Wanting to forget the betrayal. Wanting to forget the heartbreak.

Wanting to forget *everything*.

CHAPTER 18



*B*linding pain in my head greeted me when I opened my eyes at last and I fell back into present reality, settling and anchoring amidst the torn sounds of my breathing. My heart thudded and I swallowed over a lump in my throat before pushing sweat-dampened hair away from my face. Only then did I notice the tears trailing down my clammy cheeks.

I wasn't alone. Merek stood there, glaring at me with his beastly brow furrowed and his fur sticking out in tangled knots.

Uh-oh.

I tried to bolt but he gripped my shoulders before I could move. His eyes flashed and my heart beat a rapid tattoo that made my vision blur. He slowly came into focus although his outline remained hazy.

I saw enough to recognize his fury, though. And everything came rushing back at once, all the memories I'd worked so hard to restore, all returning in one fell swoop. My head wanted to split open and just spill my brains on the floor between us.

How long had he been there? Did he know what had just happened? Moaning, I collapsed against him, his hold on me the only thing keeping me from sinking to the floor.

"Did you have a nice nap?"

Oh boy. I think he wanted to kill me. Again.

Were his memories of that night the same as mine? Did he remember how I'd lost control of myself, with the vicious clarity I now did? I'd deserved to lose him for the way I'd reacted. Self-disgust tangled in my stomach.

"Please don't do anything rash," I pleaded, clutching my chest as my head swam. "I didn't know what would happen when I came in here."

"Rash," he repeated. Displaying exquisite control, he held me at arms' length, his grip on my shoulders keeping me upright but his claws didn't extend. So that was something. But his eyes...his eyes still held the same contempt, if not more.

Being this close, I cowered beneath the censure of his gaze. I really was a beast. A monster. I believed he had cheated on me, but I should not have reacted the way I did, using my magic in such a disgusting manner. It was unforgivable.

At once my lungs seized and a great weight pressed down on my chest. The longer I stared at him the harder it became to draw air. A fierce blush rose on my cheeks, muscles twitching, eyes burning.

"Take a deep breath." His fingers tightened and held me steady through the pain of my returning past.

"I *can't*. I can't...breathe."

I'd lost complete control. I could do it again, I realized with shock, if I ever felt overwhelmed, if I ever gave in to the growing longing I had for him. Heaven forbid anyone make me mad. I might send this entire spit of land straight into the ocean.

My knees gave way. I felt dizzy, with only the prince keeping me upright.

"In and out. Come on. You're turning red. Listen to the sound of my voice and do what I tell you. Inflate your lungs. Now push the air out. You can do it, Reila."

Too close, I thought. The current situation overlapped with the memories of the last time I'd been in this room, with him, his proximity bringing with it both pleasure and pain. That woman's expression of surprise blazed through my mind and I shoved him away from me the moment I broke out of my paralyzed state.

"Please don't touch me!"

Part of me wanted to continue to hate him for what I thought he'd done. But I couldn't do it. I saw his remorse, his innocence more clearly now, and if my magic power reacted in any unpredictable way to my returning memories, I didn't want him this close. He might get hurt. Again.

"Fine," he answered slowly. "You take a moment to find yourself again. I understand."

Merek released me abruptly and I lost my balance, tumbling back and knocking my tailbone against the marble floor. He was a moment too late to catch me, though he did try, scrambling forward, and for a time we sat together on the floor next to the wall of portraits. Both waiting for the other to speak first.

"You shouldn't have come into this room, Reila." He shook his head, his words soft and gentle. "It would have been much easier for everyone if you had left well enough alone. Why did you push it? How did you even find this place again?"

"I have every right to be here, Merek," I said staunchly. I straightened my back when tears threatened to resurface, knuckling my eyes the moment they did. "I deserved to know. I deserved to know about everything you tried to hide from me. About *us*."

He stared at me, and some of the pain slipped away under the unrelenting heat of those green, green eyes. Then he exhaled in a rush of air and sound and his claws were back, pawing through his hair.

"No, you *don't* deserve to know. You lost that right a long time ago. You lost any right to me the night you decided to trust your eyes instead of me and took your jealous anger out on me." He leaned into the wall, staring up to the ceiling through the thick fur that fell over his forehead.

Pushing up to my elbows, I winced at the ache in my rear. "My anger that night is not something I would wish to talk about even had I remembered it. And now, being here and seeing all I've done to you and this place, all I've done to myself—" I broke off and exhaled sharply. "I'm not sure I will ever be able to atone for the way I acted."

His head snapped around and he faced me. "You remember?"

"Everything," I admitted.

Something in my voice must have drawn him. He observed me for a moment longer before placing a hand over mine and tugging to get my attention.

"I found you here, standing there in front of our portrait as if in a trance. I didn't know what to do, so I just stayed quiet and watched and waited. Where did you go?"

I knew what he meant, just as I knew he recognized the change in me. The return of my memories amidst a flood of guilt and grief.

"I went back in time, more or less." My heart cracked and my mind conjured up the image of the ballroom. "To the night of the ball."

I told him what I'd seen in excruciating detail, from the moment I found myself in my old room—the same bedroom he'd led me to the first night—to the point where I cursed myself for what I had done.

My head was pounding so I leaned back against the wall and I rested there, eyes closed, wondering if what I had to say made any difference to him now.

"If only you'd believed me," he said. His breathing was ragged, his voice harsh. Promising retribution. Covering his hurt. "I tried to explain to you what happened and you did nothing but react irrationally. You didn't stop to hear. You didn't stop to see."

I saw it now, and a large part of me wanted to reach up and cup his cheek, keenly aware of the man behind the monster and recalling everything. The good and the bad. Especially the bad.

Adrenaline stirred in my blood as I slowly straightened, shaking my head. "You were right about me on several fronts. What you said about me before? Yes, I was cold, cruel. Consumed with ambition and willing to use my natural gifts to get what I wanted. Never from you, though," I said as gently as I could. "Did I ever explain to you about my brother?"

Groaning, I strained to stand, using the wall to help myself rise. I turned my attention back to the portraits. "After my father's death, the bank took everything we had, and I knew my mother's health would not get any better. Each day was a steady march into deeper despair, our staying at the inn taking most of the coin we had left, and with Thomas so small..." I almost choked on a sob. "I loved you, Merek, I did. I also loved that I would finally be able to take care of my baby brother in the way he deserved. A way no one would ever question or try to take from me."

Merek turned away from me with a low growl. "You are a liar."

"I have lied to you in the past," I agreed. Blinking as more and more pieces fell into place and kicking myself at how long this process had taken. How long it had taken me to get back to myself. "But I'm not the only one who kept secrets."

"You're talking about the other woman."

"Lady Sinclair," I supplied, and I could not keep the hateful tone from my voice.

A ghost of a smile formed on his mouth. "Ah, yes. Lady Sinclair."

"You kissed her." The words tasted like ash in my mouth. I stared down at him, wanting to touch him, his body so warm and familiar—

"You should have listened to me. You should have trusted me, because the night of the ball...*she* kissed *me*." He jerked to his feet and stepped back from me. "It wasn't the other way around. No matter what you thought of me—*think* of me—and no matter the issues we had, my heart has always belonged to you. From the first moment I saw you, I knew you were the one."

His words sounded strained. Far away and distant. Like I heard them from a remembered dream.

"I don't see how you could love me. I was horrible. Horrible to you, horrible for you. I might have loved you—I *did* love you—but I was not kind to you or to anyone else. I wasn't kind to myself." I hung my head in shame.

My eyes widened when his hand fell on my shoulder. "You were learning to love me. At least, I thought you were. And I know despite those layers of ice, you would have done anything for the people you care about. Reila, tomorrow is my twenty-fifth birthday. We have no more time to overcome this obstacle. That part is over. But let us agree, here and now, to make peace, you and I. If I'm going to stay this way then I want to have at least one person at my side I know I can be honest

with. Do you agree?"

How could I not?

But then again, how could he not see that I really did love him? Then, now, it didn't matter what he looked like. Only that he looked at *me*.

Merek didn't pull away when I moved toward him, hesitantly reaching out to lay my hand on his chest. The first time he'd allowed me to touch him since our first night when I'd dressed his wounds. My body remembered his, however, the same way it had remembered the song on the piano, and heat warmed my limbs no matter what he looked like.

Everything about him was familiar in a way I now understood.

His hand rose to stroke his thumb over my chin, careful not to let his claws peek through. After a moment of hesitation, he slid his arms around me. "This is a bad idea. Do not tempt me with something I cannot have."

"Who says you cannot? We can never go back," I agreed, those tears still ready to break through and doing a damn good job of trying. "We can never get back to the way things were. And honestly, if given the choice, I'm not sure I would do it again. I made mistakes, but from those mistakes I have learned. I've grown as a person. You have to know I am so sorry for what I did to you, Mer."

Though he growled in warning, his body angled closer. "Don't call me that."

His breath ruffled my hair. "What? Mer? It's what I've always called you."

Astounding, really, how past and present collided. Part of me felt completely numb to the moment, while the other...knew it was a step in the right direction.

"Not in a very long time." One hand rose to tangle in my hair, the other gripping my waist to keep me in place as he allowed his brow to press against mine. The jutting jaw and the long canines didn't bother me, because if I closed my eyes, if I listened to his breathing and the beat of his heart, I knew.

I knew who I held and I finally knew what he meant to me and why I'd been drawn to help him.

"There has only ever been you, Reila, because we are two pieces of the same terribly woven tapestry. Both at fault, both to blame," he whispered. "Both capable of redemption."

"Let's be done with the blame, then," I offered. "It does us no good to focus on it anymore, on who did what and what happened next."

Our breaths mingled as our eyes locked. What I wouldn't give to lose myself in him. Merek swallowed hard and I followed the motion of his throat.

"And I am sorry it took me this long to remember how much I have always loved you, Mer."

Knowing he would probably hate me for my next move and hardly thinking about what I was doing, I shifted to close the distance between us and I kissed him, pressing my lips to his for the first time since the magic curse twisted my love and affection into something horrid.

Beast or human, it didn't matter to me. I wanted him as much for our past as for the present and the kindness he'd shown me. He had rough patches; we both did. But our actions had to count for something.

My fingers twined through his fur to keep him close and my thoughts traveled back to the first time I'd thought to do this. How I'd wanted the feel of his body and the sensation of those lips on my skin...

Though Merek shuddered at my touch, I couldn't stop kissing him. At long last he gave in to the kiss and slid his tongue between my lips on a low moan. I might have lost myself in him had a flash of blinding light not ripped from me.

Tearing us apart and sending me flying backwards.

CHAPTER 19



I scrambled to right myself, shielding my eyes against the light that looked as though I'd captured the sun and formed a tiny supernova in the middle of the room. Wind swirled, draining the energy from me. A howl filled the room centered around that glowing star, and as much as I tried to fight against it, tried to take a step forward without falling again, I couldn't move. I found myself frozen in place with my arms outstretched to save him.

"Merek!"

I screamed to be heard above the roar. The wind died down after an eternity and left a sudden vacuum in its wake. I fell to the floor and for a long moment I stayed there, trembling, on my hands and knees as I tried to catch my breath again. Blinking against the spots dancing across my vision.

"Merek," I called finally. "Are you all right? Talk to me. *Please.*"

What had I done this time? Had I hurt him again? Something had gone wrong, surely, and my magic had reacted in the exact way I'd feared. What if I'd killed him this time?

Slowly crawling, I moved toward the figure lying prone. So still and silent.

"Oh my God, please don't be dead," I whispered as I approached. "Merek, say something. Look at me."

A groan answered me and I'd never felt such relief at a small sound. Alive, thank God.

"Mer, I'm so..." I trailed off at what my eyes told me I saw.

Nothing surprised me more than seeing the man in place of a beast. Though his eyes remained closed, I remembered what color they would be. Deep forest-green with a thin circle of chestnut-brown around the iris. The same eyes I'd peered into and loved from the moment we met. Long hair—*not fur*—trailed down past his shoulders, a rich brown, flowing past muscle and skin—skin!—amidst a smattering of dark chest hair. The shirt and pants pooled, too large, around his body.

Merek groaned again and I scurried closer, helping him up into a seated position. Seeing a man. A *man*.

My body pulsed with energy as I took him in, his mouth sinfully sensual, his chin square and strong and dusted with a layer of stubble. A straight nose led up to arched eyebrows. I ran my gaze over his hard stomach, his hips, back up to those heavy-lidded eyes.

And when he opened them—

The breath left me.

"Reila," he croaked. His hand found mine and our fingers linked.

"You're back," I managed to get out, peppering kisses along his cheeks and forehead. "You're back!"

“Don’t you get it? You said you remember.”

His voice took me by surprise, rich and deep and gruff. As though a hint of the beast remained behind. It burned something inside of me and immediately I felt overheated. My body flooded with need for him, stoking a fire I’d almost let die.

“What do you mean?”

“You cursed me so that true love was the only thing that would break the spell.” His grip on my hand tightened and his smile was breathtaking. “We...still love each other.”

We still love each other.

“The kiss!” I brought my hand to my mouth and felt a shiver of pleasure. A realization that our fates had not been sealed by my dark deed, but merely postponed. At the last minute, one day before his birthday, we had broken the curse. Five long years later, but we had finally broken it.

Cue the hysterical laughter.

“Maybe it took two monsters to bring out the humanity in each other,” he said, a happy grin tugging at the corners of his lips.

Okay, I couldn’t hold it in anymore. Giggling like a maniac, I allowed him to draw me under the crook of his arm.

“Why did you run off that night, Reila? Why didn’t you stay and let me explain things to you?”

My laughter died at once and I stiffened at the mention of that night as a hint of the old anger resurfaced. *Not the time, not the place.*

“I was...afraid,” I admitted haltingly. “I was hurt. I didn’t want to hear what you would say because that would make it real. I thought you didn’t want me. The truth of it was like a knife to my very core.”

“And the *last* time you ran off?” he half teased.

“Because someone gave me the coldest welcome of my life and nearly strangled me, of course,” I teased back.

He’d saved me in the forest, brought me back when I had tried to run away. Pawed through the snow when I asked him to help me gather potion ingredients and still managed to trust a witch who gave him nothing but empty promises. Although I’d surely meant to follow through on them.

I went completely lax when Merek drew me toward the cradle of his hips. His mouth claimed mine a moment later, his free palm cupping the back of my neck and drawing me to him in a kiss. A kiss of claiming.

Lord, to be touched again like this. By Merek. He was still the only man I’d ever loved, the only one who’d captured my affection and thawed a piece of my frozen heart.

But my heart wasn’t frozen anymore.

Even as a beast he’d managed to rip it wide open and save us both. We had wounds that would probably never fully heal, but at least we had each other to help with the healing process.

A million questions still burned in my mind and I managed to hold them all back, enjoying the kiss. Enjoying the way he captured my lips with his own and somehow managed to unravel all the years between us.

The walls we’d both kept erected shattered the longer we held the embrace.

I finally broke the kiss, shaking my head as I pressed my forehead to his. “I want you to know I never saw you as a beast, Merek. You have always been a little selfish and a little demanding—ah ah!” I pressed my finger to his lips before he could object or scold me. “But you are generous and kind. A gentle spirit. I’m the one you had to strive to see the good inside. I’m the one who needed a reminder

that power does not equal goodness.”

“You have goodness in you, Reila.” He tightened his hold on me. “You came back for me and I made things miserable for you.”

“No, you didn’t,” I objected. I ached to press the point further but shut up when he kissed me again. As though he couldn’t get enough of me.

I nibbled on the side of his neck, my body responding to his immediately. Liquid fire coursed through my veins until I burned for him. Wanting Merek to the point where I would have done anything to have him then.

Simple human touch. No one had given me what I craved the most, even a simple hug, outside of my brother Thomas. And poor Merek had endured five long years of the same longing, the same yearning for companionship and understanding. We’d both been denied these things for too long, but now the curse was broken and in our mutual suffering we’d found each other again.

A connection, real and true.

“It’s been such a long time,” I moaned against his skin when his fingers entwined with mine.

“You’re telling me.”

His unique scent filled my lungs and the guilt shrank away the longer we stayed like that, my eyes skimming over his mouth, the pert lips and the hunger there. “There’s been no one but you. No one. I couldn’t stand the touch of anyone else.”

“I would have killed him,” Merek growled, “had anyone else tried to claim you.”

“No, you would have killed *me*. I am sure of it. Don’t think you can guard me against your own hurt feelings. I know you too well.”

Another long, powerful silence took hold and I peered down at his hands, his *human* hands. Noting how slender were his fingers, how artistic, remembering how he’d deftly played the piano even when they were more like paws. I shuddered again at just how much I’d damaged him with my curse. How would I ever make it up to him?

He caught me staring at him and I blushed. Merek sighed and dropped his forehead to mine once again. One of the old gestures of affection I’d missed terribly, where our noses touched and it felt as though our energy mingled and became one.

I pressed both hands to the sides of his face and held him there. “Let us get something straight, my love. When I feel I’ve been wronged, I tend to hold a grudge, and yes, I can be a little bit mean when hurt. So I propose a truce. Perhaps from here on we should both agree to talk out our differences rather than risk going off the deep end with one another. Are we agreed?”

My breath hitched and a lump formed in my throat as I awaited his response.

“I plan on doing whatever I want to you,” he murmured. “And you are going to do the same. I agree to your truce happily.”

“*Whatever* I want?”

His voice went husky and his chuckle had me shivering. “Well, within reason, Reila. No more curses.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Every nerve ending lit as he kissed me, over and over. I had always loved his dominance, the way he could command a room without even trying. I loved his charm and charisma. And if I disregarded my hatred of how I used to be, I loved the way we’d loved each other. That at least hadn’t changed, no matter what kind of magic I’d wrought, no matter how I’d tried to kill those feelings with curses.

“I’ve waited too long for this,” he whispered as he kissed me again.

“With me?”

“Always with you. It didn’t matter how much I hated you for what you’d done. My body will always need you. And my heart. My mind. My soul.”

Every press of his mouth to my skin sent flames dancing through me. No more demons riding us. No more petty jealousies.

Nothing but love.

He had to know that I was a different person now, but it didn’t matter when it came to loving him. I would always give him everything I had, nothing holding me back, nothing but working together toward our future.

And I expected the same in return.

“You are still the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.” He slid a hand down toward my waist.

“Then prove it to me and take me.”

“Not yet,” he managed. “There is time later. So much time later.”

All the time in the world now for the two of us to get to know each other again. Or so I hoped. My eyes closed as he continued to touch, to kiss, to show me just how much he’d missed me.

The man I loved. The man I’d accepted even when I didn’t remember that we already had a past. Accepted him even as a monster. I loved Merek and Merek loved me. Monster or not—and I included myself as well—that was enough for me.

I felt confident of that love no matter what else might come our way.

Or so I thought until a resounding boom echoed through the castle—the sound of a fist pounding on the front door.

CHAPTER 20



“Don’t get up,” Merek urged through kisses, his voice husky. “Let someone else handle it. That’s why they’re here. Stay with me.” He pushed aside my sweat-dampened curls, attempting to keep me at his side, and kissed me again. Hungrily.

Oh, how I’d missed this.

But a storm had begun to brew inside of me yet again, echoing the swirling snow outside, and I had a sudden bad feeling about who might be on the other end of that knock. Emotions shook me to my core and drew me away from him. It was something I could not shake no matter how badly I wanted to ignore it.

I reluctantly broke the kiss. “I’m sorry, my sweet. It’s urgent.” I pecked the tip of his nose in apology. “I have to go. Something is wrong, I can feel it.”

His brow furrowed. “Whatever it is, we will face it together.”

I’d been forgiven, I realized gratefully, no matter what I’d done to us. No matter the obstacles we’d both had to overcome to get to this moment, we loved each other.

No matter what.

But the foreboding grew more intense, the tightness in my chest a warning that all was not well. Yet somehow I felt it concerned me, not him, and there was no reason to embroil him despite his declaration of facing anything together. This, I felt in my bones, was something I had to face by myself.

I placed another kiss on the tip of his nose, then rose quickly. The pounding on the door had not ceased, and I wondered why none of the servants had responded. “I’ll go see who it is. No need for both of us to go.”

“But—”

“Merek,” I said gently, “trust me.”

I hurried downstairs, drawing my arms around my chest to fight off a sudden chill. Gustaf appeared to be about to answer the summons at the door, but I held up a hand to stop him. Despite his rather disapproving glare, I reached out for the old metal handles and pulled. The double doors opened with a creak.

The shock of seeing my mother’s face on the other side was enough to have me holding on to the doors for support.

She wore a long wool coat with brown tweed patches covering the bare spots, a red-and-gold shawl draped over her gray hair. Her eyes widened at the sight of me, and mine popped at seeing her.

“Reila!” she burst out. Looking nearly as shocked as I felt.

Although I’d acknowledged that strange earlier apprehension I’d felt and my insistence that this was something which concerned me personally, still I’d never expected Patricia to be at the door. I’d never expected her to have made the trek

through the snow to a place she'd sworn she would never go. I glanced over her ashen features, saw the way her hands trembled, and my heart began to twist painfully. She'd gotten too pale, her skin thin and wrinkles sagging her brow, dragging her jowls.

"What are you doing here?" I shifted under Patricia's scrutiny, taking in the long shawl over her head, and the threadbare coat wrapped around her bony shoulders, the gloves covering her shaking hands. "How did you make the journey? And why? Has something happened? It's Thomas, isn't it?" My throat closed suddenly and I nearly choked at the thought.

She glanced left and right as though to make sure she hadn't been followed before saying in a hush, "I came for you. I couldn't take it anymore. I miss you. Your brother misses you. You need to come home, Reila. This place isn't for you."

As if the snow wasn't enough to fill me with a chill, her words did a damn good job and I shivered, the moment surreal.

"Momma, were you ever planning on telling me about my past? About my true relationship with the Crown Prince? Or did you *want* me to forget?" I held my arms out, keeping one hand on each of the double doors, effectively barring her entry until I could understand. Understand what, exactly, I didn't yet know, but the curious sense of foreboding crept higher along with the icy chill slithering up my spine.

Patricia simply stared at me. Ignored my questions. "Reila, come now. It's freezing out here. Let me come inside where we can talk." And there it was, her stern "mother voice." Letting me know she wasn't about to answer my questions but rather speak her own piece.

I sucked in a breath. "I think you need to go back to the village at once." I refused to look away from Patricia—refused to let my mother look away from me. "It isn't a good time for you to be here. Did you leave Thomas alone? He must be frantic with worry by now."

"I'm not leaving without you," she said. "I want you to come home with me now. Allow me to come inside first to warm these old bones and then we'll be off. Rudy can handle the weight of both of us. But we must leave soon otherwise the sun will set and we may lose our way in the woods."

"You rode Rudy here?" At least he'd made it home safely, although I wondered how he'd been able to make the trek again through those same woods. They must have been extremely lucky not to have encountered any dangerous creatures. "I'm sorry. I don't think you understand. I'm not leaving here." But she made a good point about the cold, and looking closer I could see a distinct blue hue to her skin. She was freezing and in danger of suffering from hypothermia.

Was I such a terrible daughter? She was my mother, after all.

I stepped away from the doors, allowing her entry. "Come on inside, Momma, and let's get you something hot to warm those bones. You're right, I apologize for seeming rude. But *who* is watching Thomas?"

Red flags of alarm rose around me as she stepped past me in silence, and my nervousness grew with the seconds ticking by. I quickly closed the doors against the cold.

Patricia shuffled into the echoing foyer and, taking it in as though for the first time, her mouth dropped open. "Oh. *My*."

The realization hit me with a start. For her it *was* the first time. Though I'd been planning to announce my engagement to the prince at that ball, I'd never invited my mother to the castle. She'd never stepped foot here, no matter how many elegant parties I'd thrown.

Truth was I'd been...embarrassed. Embarrassed at how she'd allowed the bank to take everything from us, spending what was left of her coin keeping us at the tavern in Bellmare instead of investing it wisely. We'd been forced to move to the dilapidated cottage instead of building a future after Father died. Living in penury. Barely scraping by. I'd resented her for that. Did not want her to be part of my new life in the castle.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts. That felt like an entire life that now belonged to someone else. Not me, certainly not me who'd chosen to treat her mother so callously. That was the old me. And I was not proud of it.

I guided Patricia into the front parlor, where I was grateful that Gustaf had laid a fire. Fighting off a terrible sensation of regret, I took her in my arms, my gaze over her shoulder and focused on the hearth. "I'm sorry you felt you had to come looking for me. Did you not get any of my letters? I wrote to you and kept you abreast of the situation," I said against her neck, breathing in the familiar scents of paint thinner and, yes, cigar smoke.

Though I noted she still hadn't answered my question about Thomas.

"You've been gone for so long. Letters or no letters, I worried about you. I worry—" She broke off, shaking her head, and I tugged off her coat and coaxed her to sit in the wingback chair closest to the fire. At least in this small, comfortable space, the hearth provided ample heat.

I watched her settle, her hands outstretched to the fire, shaking. Trembling, more like.

"Your arthritis is bad?" I asked unnecessarily.

Patricia seemed to sink in on herself, wrapping her arms around her knees on a silent sob, her head dropping. "It's been terrible without you, Reila. I know you believe you were the one keeping our family to the outskirts of the town but it simply wasn't true. The moment you left, the people...they didn't bother to pretend anymore. They didn't bother playing nice with either one of us. Thomas has been bullied more and more, and none of my paintings have sold at the market. We were ostracized."

I listened to her uneven breaths for a moment longer before sliding down onto the floor beside her, laying my hand against her leg. I could feel how her body quaked, not just from the cold, and I knew there was more she wasn't saying. "Whatever is going on, you can tell me. I'm here for you."

"The villagers don't trust you. They know about your powers." Patricia sniffled, using the back of her sleeve to wipe her eyes. "They know you're a witch. They have always known, and it was only their fear of you that kept us in relative peace."

The knot of tension in my stomach refused to loosen. I'd been so focused these last few months on breaking the curse, not giving much thought to the state of things at home, trusting that if there were any problems a message would reach me immediately. Not the case, apparently.

"Honey, I'm so sorry." Patricia raised her head, tears dripping down her cheeks. "Gray came back to the house to see you several weeks ago. At first I told him nothing. But he kept returning and things were growing worse and...he bartered for information and I could not say no to him. Not when it meant putting food on the table for Thomas." She sucked in a breath on a wrenching sob. "He knows where you are."

My bones turned to ice. "He knows *what*, exactly?"

Patricia lunged to grab my hands. "Please understand. There was no money for food. With winter coming, it was all I could do to keep wood on the fire. Gray came with food but wouldn't let us have it until I told him where you are. The moment I

did, he—”

She shivered against an angry gust of wind creeping through the cracks near the window. Her fingers twitched as they clutched mine. “I don’t know why, after I’d already told him where you’d gone, but...he grew irate. He pushed the door open, shoved me out of the way. Thomas came to my defense but he’s only a boy—” She almost broke down with the retelling. “Then Gray grabbed him.”

Red clouded my vision. “Did he hurt Thomas? He’s just a little boy!”

“You don’t understand. Gray *took* Thomas.” Patricia sobbed. Her head dropped down and when she tried to speak again, her voice was muffled. Wet-sounding. “He took my baby away, saying something about your memories. How without your memories you were easily controlled. But if you stood even the smallest chance of getting them back, if you somehow managed to help the prince resume his human form and thus take his rightful place as ruler—”

Patricia broke off abruptly at the sound of footsteps. I turned to see Merek in the doorway, taking in the scene. Gustaf trailed behind him with a tray of steaming tea, setting it on the worn ottoman in front of Patricia before scurrying out of the room.

Merek crossed to stand in front of the fire, one arm on the mantel, his gaze fixed to the flames, his expression vacant. Concealing his concern from the rest of the world behind a mask of indifference. But I saw the way his muscles tensed, his fists clenching and his jaw working.

“Gray Matthews works with the town council, the ones who have been overseeing the ruling of Bellmare during my...*absence*.” Merek paused on the last word and I couldn’t help a tiny flare of guilt. “The last I heard he was a rising star.”

“Risen,” I corrected. “He holds the highest position possible within the council. The people listen to him. His family is the wealthiest in Bellmare.”

He nodded. “They will not want to take a chance of having their power and authority disrupted. Not to mention whatever havoc you might create if you happen to regain your magic and decide to turn it against them. No, he will not take a chance on letting you outside the iron fist of his control.”

He spoke to me, for my benefit, filling in the blanks at last. I’d never told Merek how Gray had approached me with the proposition of marriage. Or how I’d rejected him.

“He has my brother,” I said.

Patricia’s gaze bounced back and forth between the two of us. “Oh, my God... Reila, you...y-you *did* it,” she whispered in awe. “You found a way to break the spell. The prince is human again.”

“The prince is standing here listening to you with two working ears.” Merek whirled and locked his gaze on Patricia, his eyes intense. “And yes, she did break the spell. As she promised.”

Without hesitation I rushed to him and reached out for the comfort of his arms. My heartbeat raced as I watched my mother’s face from the safety of Merek’s embrace.

Worry etched the lines on her forehead even deeper, and pain from her arthritis had her trembling like a leaf in a gale. “Oh, this is terrible, terrible,” she moaned.

“What? Why? Why is it terrible, Momma? He’s human again.” I squeezed Merek to show both of them just how much I cared.

“No, you don’t understand,” she insisted. “Prince Merek is next in line for the throne, but he hasn’t accepted the crown yet. Their greatest fear is that you’ll find a way to reverse the spell and restore him to his rightful place.”

I looked at her incredulously. Why was that a bad thing? Then I felt Merek stiffen in my arms.

“Yes,” he said softly. “As long as I was the Beast, I would never have accepted the crown, preferring to stay hidden away from public view. The council feels their power and authority threatened. I daresay there are some who would love nothing better than to take the throne away from me, by force if necessary.”

“That can’t be true,” I said to him, though it was beginning to make a lot of sense. “Besides, they don’t yet know that the curse has been broken.” I turned back to my mother. “There’s more, isn’t there? You didn’t come here to tell me about Thomas. At least, that wasn’t the only reason. What else brought you to the castle, Momma? *Tell us.*”

My urge to shake her nearly overwhelmed me, as did my desire to retreat into the routine Merek and I had developed over the last few months, just the two of us. The moment the curse broke it seemed the outside world could not wait to sink its teeth into us again.

“I came to warn you. Gray has rallied the villagers and they are on their way now,” Patricia stated sadly. “They will be here shortly. But not for the Beast.” She looked directly into my eyes, and I saw real fear there. “For you, Reila.”

I clutched my beloved as if clinging to a spar after a shipwreck. Buffeted by waves of trepidation.

They are coming to take me from Merek.

CHAPTER 21



My mind screamed at me to do something, to retaliate, to use whatever magic power I had to hunt down these men and not just stop them but make them pay for what they planned to do. The anger hovered over me, waiting to descend and take hold. To work the same kind of magic I had the night I'd transformed Merek.

"Well," I said to Patricia, my nerves jangled, "that explains why you wanted so badly for me to leave with you."

Merek gathered me closer still.

"We don't have a lot of time, Reila," she pleaded. "If we leave now, we can make our escape before they arrive. Rudy is still outside."

Panic ached beneath my sternum at the thought of losing everything Merek and I had begun to build. The dream we'd lived in until now. "I'm not leaving—"

Merek cut me off. "She's right. You need to go."

I turned to him with wide eyes, shocked at his words. His heart beat erratically against my own. "You can't mean that. You don't know what you're saying!"

"I absolutely do." He bent his head down to meet my eyes. There were no more words for the longest time. Only the sound of my heart thundering in my ears.

"They're going to stop at nothing to keep things the way they are, and that includes getting rid of you," he finally said. "You pose a huge threat to their way of life. I'm honestly surprised they've allowed you as much freedom as they have in the past."

"I'm not leaving you." I clutched him fiercely, knowing if I released my hold on him I would drop to the floor, my knees gone. "I'm not leaving you!"

Not when we've finally found each other again. Not when I know everything now.

He shook his head. "I insist. You will take the service road, away from the castle. There will be fewer eyes to see you there. Go, now, and when the men arrive, they will find themselves deprived of their prey. I will keep an eye out for Thomas on the off-chance Gray decided to bring the boy along for leverage."

"No! There has to be another way," I argued. "I'll stay and fight. I'll draw my magic to me and—"

"And," Merek supplied, "we will figure it out when there's time to do so. Right now, it seems we've run out of it." He tilted his head as though hearing something too far away for me to make out. "I'll find you again, I promise," he assured me, "as soon as the threat is taken care of. Right now, you and your mother need to leave."

"But they have Thomas!" I cried, grasping at reasons for me to stay.

"All the more reason you must go. Go save your brother. Save your brother and I'll make sure you have a home to return to. All of you. Don't think this is an easy

decision for me but at the moment our backs are to the wall.”

Merek helped Patricia to stand, then grabbed my hands. “You’ll remember the way back to me,” he said, bending down to capture my lips in a quick, sweet kiss that nevertheless was rich with promise. “We’ve wasted enough time. Go. Your brother needs you.”

I didn’t have any energy left to argue with Merek, not when my fear for Thomas hurt my chest and urged my feet to move.

I grabbed Patricia and tugged her to my side, trying not to focus on her quivering or the way she kept her gaze on the floor rather than on the prince. I myself couldn’t look at Merek as I strode past him but for vastly different reasons. We walked toward the door. Back toward the life I’d known after I cursed myself to forget everything I’d already lived.

The two of us hurried out into the biting cold and I had to remind myself to slow down for her. She couldn’t walk as well as she used to, the arthritis stiffening her joints and making it especially hard for her to maneuver in the snow. Nothing but sheer panic could have brought her out in this weather all the way to the castle. Panic for the safety of her children.

My heart swelled with love for her, despite her myriad mistakes.

Tied to one of the rose arbors near the entrance to the garden, Rudy waited for us, his breaths creating a cloud of mist in the cold. I was elated to be reunited with my old friend, but riddled with sorrow to be leaving. I took a final glance back. The spires of the castle towers rose like two stone pillars in an eternal stretch toward the sky.

I would see this place again, I promised myself against the yawning pit opening in my stomach. I would see this place and I would make it a home and there would be nothing but joy within those walls. I was determined to make it a reality.

When I turned away, I saw Patricia nodding, her sharp chin turned toward one of the windows on the second story. A shadow flashed behind the pane and was gone in seconds.

“The men will surely follow our tracks through the snow,” she said after I helped her onto Rudy’s back. “We will have to hurry.”

I climbed behind her and we situated ourselves. The horse huffed under our weight, eager to be gone from this place. “If the snow keeps falling at this rate, it should cover our trail.” I urged Rudy to more speed. “At any rate, they won’t have expected that you rode ahead to warn us. Merek was right. At least we have a bit of a head start on them.”

“The prince seems kind enough,” she said over her shoulder as we made our way around the castle, away from the woods and toward the other road where supplies were brought in regularly. “He adores you, clearly.”

“We are in love,” I said with no little satisfaction.

“I know. Now.”

“You’re convinced of my love for the prince now? What about five years ago?”

“Well, I must admit I thought it was a strange match,” she replied. “Until I saw the two of you together again, I didn’t fully understand. You’ve always had so much love for each other, Reila, even though I disapproved.”

“You...disapproved of us being together?”

“I did, because I felt you were reaching beyond your station because you *had* to, not because you loved the man. And I felt he had lowered his standards out of the force of your beauty. Not everyone saw the goodness in you, Reila, and I am ashamed to say I doubted His Highness’s motives for courting you. Now I understand.”

My tongue doubled in size, throat going dry, and I knew I had little to say to that. I stowed the information away for later. We didn't have the time for me to pick it apart just yet.

I tapped my heels against him and sent Rudy into a brisk canter as I tried to adjust to the stride while holding onto my mother. Snorting, the horse fought his way through the drifts. Leaving felt wrong. I couldn't shake the sense that I shouldn't be running away. But if I stayed, the consequences could be dire. Anger and violence—and magic—were not the answer.

We made it no farther than the first bend in the service road before I knew I'd made a mistake.

After so many years of living in solitude, both Merek and I, we'd found each other again. We'd found the will to make it through to the next day, to fight for the future, and damn if I would give it all up now.

I was no hero. I'd never wanted to be the one who fought the war, who saved the day, and because of that I had never moved forward, content to simply exist. Hide myself away from humanity. Losing my memories had made that easier somehow, but now they were back with a vengeance.

Wrong. All wrong.

No matter what Merek may think of me deep down or how he worried for my safety, I refused to abandon him again.

"We have to turn around." The brisk wind blew hair around my face as I pulled the reins and brought Rudy to a halt. "We can't leave. Not like this. I'm sorry, Momma."

"Reila?"

I used the reins and my heels to head Rudy back in the direction we'd come. "Momma, I refuse to leave him again when he needs me the most. And the mob about to hammer at his door is only there for one reason. I'm going to make them pay for it, too."

Patricia said nothing but grasped tighter to the saddle horn. I had to give my mother credit. She held on for dear life and kept her opinions on my change in attitude to herself.

Rudy plowed back through the trail he'd recently created in the snow. "What if this puts your brother in harm's way?" Patricia moaned at last.

"You take the horse and return to the village to find where Gray is keeping Thomas. Pack your belongings and make for the coast with him. I will find you the moment things are resolved. I won't let anyone hurt you," I vowed.

I did not need rescuing. Not anymore. I would help Merek, find my brother, and right the wrongs I'd done so many years ago. One way or another, I'd fight for the happiness I'd been lucky to reclaim.

The ride back to the castle seemed to take longer than the scant minutes of our hasty exit. Leaving Patricia seated on Rudy's back beside the main entrance, I jumped off, landing in a drift of snow.

"Now go!" I told her, and gave Rudy a sharp slap on the rump to get him moving again. My mother shot one glance over her shoulder at me then put her head down and galloped off. I strained to hear any sounds of people approaching. So far so good. Satisfied that Patricia was safely on her way, I turned to the front doors of the castle.

The emptiness of the castle greeted me as I stepped over the threshold, yet there was no desolation this time. Nothing but the soaring ceilings and abandoned luxuries I'd come to love. The dusty chandelier remained dimly lit, the candles perpetually gracing the foot of the winding staircase leaving pools of wax behind. It

was all familiar now.

My home.

“Merek!”

He’d find it insane I’d returned of my own free will, right as I’d completed what I came here to do. I’d have to be mad to voluntarily face the crowd hell-bent on hunting me.

Shoving all thoughts of my madness aside, I ran across the foyer and up the stairs, with each footstep echoing through the castle. “Merek, where are you?”

Moments later the door to his room burst open and I found myself looking into the face of a man prepared for battle. “Reila, what the hell are you doing?” he said immediately. “You shouldn’t be here.”

I cupped his cheek. “There is nowhere else for me to be.”

He drew me against his chest and I realized then he’d changed into a pair of sturdy breeches, long-sleeved shirt, and a leather vest. And for a crazy, mad moment I wished he could have kept some of the heavy fur from before. At least it would have provided some protection for his newly human skin, since he was now a lot more vulnerable.

“They’re coming fast. You need to hide,” he urged. “The staff and I should be able to halt their progress and keep them from entering the castle right away but there is only so long we can hold them off.” His face contorted into a fierce scowl. “They will not have you. That I vow.”

“It’s too late.” The knowledge settled inside of me and everything went still. “I’m sorry. They’re already here.”

CHAPTER 22



Surprise, surprise, the mob carried torches. A typical witch hunt accoutrement but one that frightened me nonetheless. I half expected to see pitchforks too as I watched from the upper window as they swarmed the courtyard, trampling the snow, destroying the gardens. Their shouts rose in a crescendo of chaos.

Kill the witch!

They had come for me but we would all pay the price. These determined men would not stop until they'd painted the castle with our blood. A roll of thunder sounded in the distance, though I doubted the snowstorm caused it. Had I conjured it myself?

Clusters of men separated themselves from the mob, still shouting as they wielded their guns and chains toward the castle's front doors. Straight toward the heart of the home.

Except for the handful of servants, who no doubt were terrified for their own safety by now, we had no one on our side to help us withstand the attack.

Merek put a hand on my back, hustling me from the room with a push. "Go to your room and stay there. Barricade the door. And do not even think to argue with me on this."

"What are you going to do?"

A crash of glass sounded and the smell of smoke filled the hallway. I could hear them battering against wood as they turned their attention to breaking down the front doors. Already the smoke was curling around corners, creeping up the staircase, causing a lightheadedness I couldn't shake.

I let Merek push me toward the bedroom I'd used since arriving, too dizzy to fight back.

"Stay inside," he barked, shoving me into the room and closing the door behind me.

"I want to help!" I yelled, to no avail.

I knew it didn't matter what I said at this point. The danger was here, on our doorstep, and Merek was determined to hold them at bay alone. Smoke slid beneath the door in curling tendrils, and I feared they were going to burn the castle down. With us inside.

I raced to barricade the door, flipping the lock as though it might offer some small protection. Then I grabbed a chair from the vanity and shoved it under the knob. Not enough to keep out a determined mob, but it might stall them for a few precious moments.

The gathering storm clouds blocked the sun and shadowed the world in shades of gray, but I didn't dare light a candle or lantern to mark my presence in the

darkness.

The shouts grew louder as I heard the distinct sound of splintering wood, and I guessed they'd broken through the front doors. Soon those men would surge through the castle hunting for us. Hunting for *my* people.

Not this time.

My gaze whipped to the door and it wasn't long before fists pounded upon it. Then fists gave way to stouter weapons, rifle butts, axes, cudgels, who knew, but eventually the wood shattered and I counted four faces peering inside. They each were gruff-looking.

Gray's men. I recognized a couple of them immediately from past glimpses in the market.

It hadn't taken them long to batter through the door. And Merek thought I'd be safe here?

"Looke what we have here," the one on the left crooned, his voice sardonic. A hat obscured his eyes.

Smoke billowed in through the holes in the door to burn my eyes. I steeled my resolve and kept my stinging gaze on the intruders instead. The uneasy sensation inside of me grew and morphed, the urge to shatter their bones almost impossible to ignore. Sparks began to burst to life along my fingertips.

"What *do* you have here?" I questioned the not-so-gentlemen. "Perhaps you'd care to enlighten me?"

"The X on the treasure map, I reckon." The one on the right knocked his shoulder against the door and the chair I'd wedged there shifted an inch.

"Except this treasure comes with a curse," I took joy in telling him.

Come for me at your own risk.

The man with the hat reacted first. He jolted upright and stumbled away from the door, swearing. "It's the witch, Bobby. That damn witch is really here, just like Gray said she would be!"

"I think we can do without the name calling," I said. I moved closer to the door, smoke curling around my ankles as though drawn to me. The shadows shifted and I knew there were more in the hallway than these buffoons.

"She's the one Master Matthews wants," the other man whispered from the corner of his mouth. "The one we came here to get. We can't hurt her."

"Yeah, but what does he want to do with her?" Bobby asked.

"He wants you to get out of my way and out of this castle," I answered for him.

A thought sent the smoke billowing back toward the door on an unseen breeze, the same way I'd made the feather levitate without a thought, or the eggs in the basket explode. The same way I'd formed a snowball to launch at Merek in a fit of giggles.

Magic.

The loss and pain and guilt had had to go in order for me to access it completely. I knew that now. The second I pushed them aside, the power grew inside of me like an unfolding rose, and for the first time in a long time I felt like I controlled *it* instead of the other way around. Still, my biggest fear was that I would backslide into the same person I'd been before my curse erased a huge portion of my personality. Along with my memories.

Well, with great risks come great rewards and all that...

I had to believe in the rewards. Because physically I didn't have enough strength to do anything other than run my mouth.

"Sorry, guys."

The apology barely left my lips before the magic rushed out of me in living flames. They burst through the door, disintegrating the wood instantly, leaving scorch marks on the stone walls. I felt my energy wane the moment the flames extinguished.

Bobby and his friends bolted in the opposite direction, screaming. Their terrified shouts echoed down the hallway.

No time to waste, though. Less now than before. The chants of the mob grew louder and louder.

I rushed into the hall, urging my steps faster and faster. Monique popped her head out of one of the rooms, her arms full of laundry, the same moment two more men rounded the corner. She cried out at the sight of them, at the weapons in their hands and their leering grins. With my heart jackknifing, I ran, pushing past a sudden chill and the queasy tilt of my stomach, and sent a wave of magic toward them.

Ignorant assholes. They thought they could come here and hurt *my* people?

Monique continued to shriek as the wave of power pushed the two men back down the staircase they'd recently climbed, sending them ass-over-elbows until their bones broke in a multitude of places. She shrank closer to the wall, with the laundry clutched to her chest as though it would protect her, her whole body trembling.

The same thing I'd done to her. The same—

“Monique!”

I called her name twice more before she finally turned to me, her terror evident. I pointed to the room she'd recently vacated.

“Go back inside and stay there. Lock the door. Push something heavy against it if you can. Find a place to hide and stay there. And whatever you do, don't try to fight back. You hide. Do you understand?”

I didn't ask her where her mother was, and I could only pray the older woman was safe and out of the way, along with the other castle servants.

Monique squeaked in acknowledgement and bolted without waiting to hear what else I had to say. It seemed there were more apologies in order once this day ended. I swore under my breath, moving toward the lower level of the castle, jumping over the bodies of the two men I'd sent flying.

Dear God, would I be required to shed more blood before this day came to an end? Probably, and I would not be squeamish about it. My thoughts sharpened to an edge and the slim bit of guilt I felt for those two quickly dissipated.

Rounding the great staircase toward the foyer, I stepped into a living nightmare. Fate had taken a cruel twist and I found myself walking through great puddles of blood where the mob fought to pillage the castle and the castle fought back. The two women who worked in the kitchen as scullery maids lay lifeless on the marble, their knives at their sides, eyes open and vacant.

They were innocent in all this and yet had given their lives trying to fight off the attackers. My fury heated from a simmer to a full-blown boil and threatened to take down everyone in the immediate vicinity. No, bad idea. I didn't know who else might be close to me, maybe more servants though I hoped they'd found suitable hiding places, and no idea where Merek had gone.

I gathered my wits. I couldn't lose it now, not with the danger pressing closer. Following the sounds of struggle, I made for the front parlor and the swords I remembered hung on the wall above the fireplace. If I could grab one—

And suddenly I was pushed, my back slamming against the stone wall.

“Well, well, darling,” the man holding me purred. “Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes!”

CHAPTER 23



His breath knocked out of me, I could only stare at Gray and the revolver he held in his left hand, his right clenched around my throat. My screams raged inside of me yet I couldn't make my body respond when he tightened his grip.

The muzzle of the gun pointed directly between my eyes. My stomach churned, throat burning. I felt trapped, prey to the predator standing in front of me.

"Did you not think I'd find you?" Gray asked, moving a step closer. His hand at my throat slipped lower to press firmly below my collarbone, and the pressure of his fingers had me growing cold with repugnance.

"I didn't think of you at all," I managed to get out.

His brows drew together and his smirk turned sinister. "You ran right back to your prince, I see. Why is that, Reila? No matter what happened to you, you still believed deep down I was not worthy of you. Isn't that right?"

I fixed him with my most ferocious glare. "Where is Thomas?"

Dear God, please let my brother be safe.

Gray pushed me back harder, his forearm against my throat and the gun jammed to my forehead. "You will answer me."

I fought desperately hard not to focus on the gun and the way Gray's finger itched to pull the trigger. He'd dressed himself to the nines for this; the ermine coat hanging to his knees probably cost more than our cottage. Not a speck of dust or debris on him, which told me he let others do his dirty work for him. What a disgusting excuse of a man.

"Did you really think I would choose you over Merek, no matter the state of my mind? No matter what I remember or don't remember?" I asked, voice sharp and thin. "You aren't fit to lick his boots. Now I suggest you call off your dogs. You have no business here."

I guess my insult hit home because his grip loosened just enough for me to squirm away, although now he had me cornered in the front parlor with no escape. Gray stalked my movements, a rage I'd never seen before turning his handsome face into a parody of himself.

Who is the beast now?

"I am not here simply because of your pretty face, Reila Barnes. I'm here because you are a threat to my prestige and status. A threat I can't control without your acceptance of my ring on your finger." He waved the gun at me. "Now hold your hands up where I can see them clearly. One hint of magic and I will not hesitate to pull this trigger and blow your brains all over this room. Do I make myself clear?"

I raised my chin to lock eyes with him. His unwavering stare met mine. I refused to cower before him no matter what threats he made.

"I don't need a spell to deal with you," I tossed at him. "You are nothing but a sniveling coward who uses your money to get what you want."

He chuckled grimly. "Coward? Is that the best you've got, really?" He sighed melodramatically. "Well, I suppose there may be some truth in that, seen from your point of view of course. But I will tell you what I am *not*." His face contorted into a fierce glare. "I am not a fool. I did not come unprepared. I brought along a magician to deal with you." He snapped the fingers of his free hand and a gasp left my lips before I could stop it.

Gustaf rounded the corner with a glowing gold orb the size of a paperweight in his hand. I felt the power rolling off of it immediately. One word from him and the blast would rip through me, taking away whatever tentative magic I'd begun to harness once again and return it to the wielder of the orb. The force from the artifact ripped the air from my lungs like invisible hands slowly squeezing.

How...

I struggled to think, to remember these last few months for any kind of clue about Gustaf I might have missed. His warning came to mind, yet nothing else hinted at the low hum of magic I sensed from him.

I'd been the fool.

"What—" I began but couldn't finish, because Gustaf twitched a finger of his free hand and my throat instantly felt gripped by an invisible noose. I struggled for breath, clawing with my own fingers at something that wasn't there.

"I am a man who knows how to look out for his own interests. And if you have no room in your heart to accept me then you become a threat to my interests. Simple as that," Gray said. "Gustaf, let her go. I want her to be able to speak."

The force released me and I staggered down to the floor, coughing and trying desperately to refill my starving lungs with air.

Gray stared at me with a relaxed ease, as though engaged in a game of poker with the boys and already having a strategy in place. My skin crawled the longer he looked at me.

All this, for me? Too bad for him I wasn't the weak-minded witch he thought me to be.

"What do you want from me?" I tried to ask, though all that came out were grunted syllables not even close to words. Tears burned the corners of my eyes and I hated the fact that Gray could see them.

Woozy and still sucking in air as if I were drowning, I struggled to keep my attention on the gun, as well as on the man with the orb whom I'd been foolish enough to write off as insignificant. Now they made an impressive pair. One equipped with sorcery and the other with a man-made weapon of steel.

How did I fight against the two of them?

Gray bent to snatch at my wrist and drag me to my feet. "I want you and your magic at my side, Reila. I want the security that kind of power offers for me, for my parents. I want to be able to rest comfortably in my bed knowing the whole of Halsworthy is at my fingertips. And if I cannot have you—"

"I would rather die than have anything to do with you." Hatred twisted inside of me like a living thing, and if looks could kill Gray would have instantly been nothing but a greasy spot on the marble floor.

Gray shrugged and the fur of his ermine coat glistened in the firelight. "Well, that can be easily arranged."

The attack happened fast. Merek burst into the room with a thunderous roar that split the silence. He dove for Gray a hair too late, the other man turning with his pistol and firing off a shot as the world around us slowed.

I screamed into the explosion of sound. Before I had a chance to react, or even see where the bullet hit, a burst of magic snapped me in the shoulder, and when I jerked around, Gustaf stood there. His knuckles collided with my jaw a second later.

The impact had me spinning, falling down yet again, blood dripping from the rips in my skin. I went down *hard*. And immediately I knew he'd used the orb to add to his power when his fist landed. Well, well. Smarter than I'd given him credit for, though the cunning didn't make me hate him any less.

I caught a glimpse of his smirking features a moment before he took advantage of my surprise and fell on me, one hand around my neck as he pummeled my head repeatedly onto the marble floor. Stars danced behind my eyes.

"Clean up your own mess this time, you filthy witch," he spat out with a grimace. His teeth flashed yellow as blackness crept closer. "Your cruelty will not go unpunished."

There was blood on the floor at my feet. I saw it when Gustaf twisted my neck to the side. Mine? No. Blood trailing from another body and slowly seeping toward where I lay.

"Merek..."

Every fiber of my being urged me to get up and go to him. He *had* to survive.

Gustaf yanked me to him in a harsh gesture, chuckling when I grunted, his legs trapping me better than any cage.

I cried out as a swell of his magic battled with mine. My insides felt like lava. Gustaf's hand tightened further, and the proximity to the orb kept my magic from reacting to save me. My lungs seized. I couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. Could only focus on the narrowing of my world toward that condescending smile.

Damn you, Gustaf.

"Come then, little girl. Let us see what you can truly do," Gustaf muttered. "I know you have been hiding your truth from me. Come and show me the might of the witch who turned the prince into a beast and brought the kingdom to its knees."

The old manservant stared down at me, daring me to retaliate. Daring me to defend myself when he knew I was not able to do so. Fury pulsed through me until it came up against the wall of the artifact he carried. The damn thing sapped the last of my energy away from me and funneled it all toward my enemy.

The same way he'd done during my entire stay at the castle.

I saw it clearly now, how he'd dogged me during my explorations, how odd I'd thought it that I couldn't get a handle on my magic. Gray's man, installed to keep an eye on me, perhaps even in place long before to watch the prince and report back.

No wonder the town had done nothing to help Merek.

I tried to rally against the force of his grip, his magic. I tried to get to Merek and see if he'd been hit by the gunshot, see what had happened to Gray during their fight. Did either man live or had they managed to kill each other?

I couldn't bear it.

My eyes shut on a final shudder and in the sanctuary of my mind, my last thoughts were for Merek and whether he'd survived. For Monique upstairs. For the others, Renaldo and Marylynn and the rest. Did they still live?

I listened to the echo of Gustaf's eerie chuckle before succumbing to the dark.

CHAPTER 24



*P*atiently, I waited to die.

Inside my chest, my heart shattered, because I knew no matter how I'd tried, the people I loved had still been hurt. I drifted through the pain until even that failed to register. There was nothing now. Nothing except the calm crackle of the flames in the fireplace and the light waiting at the end of the tunnel. Would I see my father again?

"Not this time. You fight back, Reila. You *win*."

The smooth baritone sounded through a sea of black and at once the pressure on my throat eased. I drew in a breath that caused more pain than anything else and thrashed at Gustaf though he was already gone, torn away from me the same way I'd been pulled from the darkness.

My gasps turned into coughs and I rolled onto my side, clawing at the open air.

Too near the fire, the heat from the flames burned into me like a reminder. *Keep fighting. Keep fighting until you win.*

I bit my lip and felt a gush of blood accompany the pain. It was time to get moving. Apparently, I wouldn't be dying today. I opened my mouth to thank whoever had called me from the abyss and saw Gustaf lying on his left hip with his hand on his right leg, putting pressure against a wound so deep I could see down to the white of his bone. Something had torn through his skin and muscle to get him to release me.

Strangely, I felt no remorse.

Rolling over, I struggled to rise to my knees, my chest aching and my lungs aching to draw in enough breath to keep me from passing out.

But when I glanced up, there Merek stood in blood-stained clothes, and I hated seeing the fear in his eyes. I hated the men who had put it there.

"You're alive. I thought I'd lost you."

He had one of the swords from the plaque above the fireplace in his hand. Blood dripped from the tip. So that's what he'd used on Gustaf.

"Are you all right?" He held out a hand for me to take and I breathed a sigh of relief the instant our palms touched.

It took me a long moment to swallow over the lump in my throat and find my voice. "Will I ever be all right?" I asked in return. "Where is Gray?"

I ran my hands over the lines of his shoulders, down his chest and along his sides, searching for the gunshot wound. I'd seen the revolver go off, hadn't I? Heard the boom of the shot, and yet I couldn't find where Merek had been hit.

"Little love, I'm fine. Stop your worrying. Gray is over there." Merek pointed down and to the left. His gaze darkened and when he spoke, his voice contained an icy threat I felt down to my soul. "You will let me deal with him accordingly. Prison

is too good for his meddling. I did not kill him outright because I want him to pay for the suffering he has caused.”

Gray was sprawled on the floor, leaning heavily against the wingback chair, legs buckled and cradling his broken arm against his chest, unraveling before my eyes. His thick hair lay around his face, disheveled. The expensive coat he wore was torn in multiple places and blood seeped from a dozen cuts. His shoulders shook with his frantic sobs.

I didn’t feel remorse for him, either, not after everything he’d put us through. “What did you do to him?”

Did I even want to know?

Merek shrugged and I pitied the fool who stood on the receiving end of his wrath. “He wanted to see the Beast,” he told me simply. “That is exactly what I showed him.”

But the cold feeling had crept down into the marrow of my bones. Men like Gray and Gustaf...they wouldn’t stop coming. There would be others to take their place. Once we contained the immediate threat, there would be more.

There would always be more. A groan caught in the back of my throat. We might have made it through this evening with minimal loss but what about tomorrow? The next day?

The village would react once they realized we’d hurt their favorite golden boy and then the real mob would come with more than torches and pitchforks.

“He deserved nothing less for bringing his men here and hurting the people I care about,” Merek was saying. “Did I not tell you I would handle this?”

Merek drew my attention with a swipe of his thumb over my cheekbones. “Reila, don’t cry. We can fix this. I left Gray alive so he can tell us where to find your brother. No matter where Matthews hid the boy, we will find him.”

My brother Thomas. He was in danger as well. I sent up a silent prayer that my mother would be able to locate him and get them both to safety. But even if she did, what then? Would we be chased, detested to the point where we feared daily for our lives?

I had a terrible feeling about the next step of the journey but I knew what I had to do. And I was prepared to sacrifice everything. Gustaf and Gray were only the start of something, the tip of the iceberg. Merek might be strong but I refused to lay the weight of this on his shoulders. It was for me to bear alone.

“I know what has to be done,” I said at last.

The late hour would work to my advantage. Most of the villagers were already tired from a long day of work, not to mention the trek up the mountain for the few who followed Gray. Their minds would all be open and easily susceptible to my next piece of magic. I simply had to ensure it would reach throughout the kingdom.

A huge expanse and little time.

Merek read the resolve on my face and cleared his throat before he spoke. “I don’t like what you’re implying. Please tell me you have something in mind that doesn’t involve another spell.”

I held back a smile for his benefit alone, hoping he wouldn’t see what I tried to hide. “I’m sorry, Merek. I’m sorry for everything I’ve done. Just know that whatever happens next, I do love you and I always will.”

“Wait a minute, what do you mean?”

I was already running. Past him and out the open, demolished front doors away from the sounds of the mob still in the midst of their pillaging and looting. I needed space to work this next bit. I knew it inherently.

Though the snow heaped heavy and weighed down the hem of my dress, I pushed through, uncaring at the cold biting my bare skin. A single thought had a gust of air pressurized around the opening to the castle and sealing it tight. No one would enter and no one would leave until I completed my task.

Behind me I heard Merek roaring for me, calling my name and begging me to come back. To reconsider whatever foolish notion I had stuck in my head.

I didn't have the physical strength to fight my enemy, no, but I knew the sort of power I had at my fingertips now that I was free.

And I had Gustaf's orb in my pocket, filled with his magic plus what he'd stolen from me.

I slid to a halt next to the frozen rose bushes at the edge of the terrace.

Reila, no!

I heard his voice in my head as though he stood beside me in the snowdrifts. "I love you, Merek."

Closing my eyes, I settled my mind, the outside world around me going eerily silent and still. Then I dropped down deep into myself. In my mind I remembered the night five years ago, searching for Merek to lay waste to the man I'd believed wronged me.

I anchored myself in the memory of that power and the spell I'd wrought back then. The shadows I'd long suppressed rose for me to harness now, shadows of power and might with enough force to change the course of history. I intended to do the same again. All the red-hot rage I'd suppressed finally burst into the open and I waved my hands in a circle in front of me, light glowing in the air.

This memory spell would not be an easy one. I didn't expect it to be, just as I didn't expect it to come without a cost. I was prepared to pay it regardless.

Take care of my mother and brother. Watch over them the way you have your people and make sure no harm comes. I do this for us all.

In spite of the cold, a layer of sweat drenched my skin and froze immediately. My jaw clenched. My magic rose from the dark pit inside of me until it flowed out through every finger, every toe. It grew and grew until it felt like I rode a wave of thunder through the sky, with enough power to decimate everyone.

This would be the biggest piece of magic of my life. And luckily for me, it came when I called.

Through that power I found the minds of the men still in the castle, prepared to wipe them clean. I found the minds of the creatures in the woods, of the villages sleeping in their cottages close to the forest's edge, and then beyond. The memory spell would ensure the entire kingdom would forget about me being a witch, forget that Merek had ever been a beast. And along with them...I would forget as well.

Everything.

Pieces of myself began to break off the longer I held on to the magic, the more I struggled to center that power on the minds of the kingdom. I knew they were pieces I would never be able to get back.

I didn't care.

The air filled with the strength of the magic and the golden glow in front of me burned bright and brighter. Sparks began to fly as the wave radiated out, finding every beating heart and wiping out memories of the last five years, everything concerning Merek and my family. Implanting false memories instead, filled with happiness and contentment.

I was distantly aware of banging on the air shield I kept in place at the front entrance. Merek. He screamed for me to reconsider, knowing the price, knowing we would never again get back what we lost.

It didn't matter. He would *live*. And perhaps, in time, he would come to love again.

With the last of my conscious thought, I sent a wave of pure adoration out toward Merek and my mother and to wherever Gray had Thomas hidden. Then I released the spell to rewrite reality and collapsed in the resulting boom.

CHAPTER 25



*T*he dull thud of boots through the snow echoed in an eerie tempo though I couldn't place the person wearing them. I heard only the heavy and muffled fall of each leather sole as he drew closer, the thundering of my pulse in time with those steps.

Then someone was down on his knees beside me and I noticed the ragged tempo of his breathing. A thumb swiped beneath my eyes, down my cheek to caress my lower lip.

"Are you all right? Can you sit up?"

I slowly came back to my body and in that instant knew nothing beyond the pulsating agony. Raising my hand to my head, it came away smeared with blood, a lump the size of an egg at the back of my skull.

"Careful now. You don't want to hurt yourself again," the man said softly. "You've already been through quite enough today."

Tender hands pressed the small of my back before an arm wrapped itself around my shoulders. I leaned into the comforting warmth of the fellow though I couldn't see his face. I remembered nothing outside the pain. No past and no present. I certainly had no thought for the future.

There was only the cold ground beneath me, the lump on my head, and the man with the tears in his voice when he spoke to me.

*Me...*an interesting concept. If I wiggled my fingers they reacted, the same with my toes. My head tilted from side to side but beyond feeling the way my heart beat or the dull throb of pain throughout my body, I felt empty.

He gathered me to his chest and I settled there, unwilling to protest. Over the man's shoulder I made out the setting sun through a haze of clouds that seemed to be retreating with each passing second. The burnt-orange and red of sunset tinted the snow.

"What did you do to yourself this time, love?" Each word the man spoke into my hair sounded like it took a monumental effort to get out.

I lifted my chin to him then, pushing his long hair aside to see him fully. Wow, those eyes. I'd never seen eyes that color before. Or had I?

I didn't know. Everything inside my head was a big blank. Yet those eyes captured me immediately and would not let me go.

"I'm sorry," I said, my fingers trailing along the clenched line of his jaw. "Do I know you?"

He seemed sweet enough, I thought. Concerned about me and my safety. Maybe he had a right to be, because when I moved again, an ache in my lower extremities made itself known before spreading through the whole of me.

Ouch. Had I been thrown from a horse? Did I *own* a horse?

Slowly, very slowly, the man shook his head. His hold on me lightened and although he remained touching me, some of the warmth fled with him. “No, I’m the one who should be sorry,” he told me, his voice thick with emotion. It appeared to me as if he was choking back sobs. “You’ve had an accident and bumped your head. I shouldn’t be pushing you. It seems, however, you have bewitched me and I could not keep myself from touching you. Rest assured I will not make any untoward advances.”

The man edged away and I saw the tears turning his eyes to glass. His gaze tracked over me from head to toe, searching for wounds.

I ran an awkward hand through my hair, making sure to avoid the bruised area of my cranium and wincing when I came too close. For a moment, rage twisted the man’s features into something brutish, beast-like. He quickly pushed those dark emotions aside and when he next looked at me, I saw nothing but concern.

“I must have hit my head hard,” I told him. “I can’t recall what happened. Maybe you can tell me.”

He gave me a somewhat watery smile. “I’d be happy to sit and chat with you. Come on, let’s get you inside before you freeze to death.”

I allowed him to guide me to my feet. To keep his hand on me when dizziness had me wobbling and losing my balance.

Composed and calm, the man picked me up in his arms and I did not fight him. I had no reason to. I didn’t get a bad sense about him, and my intuition told me he was a person to trust.

Huh. I had intuition? I must also possess a good judge of character, then. That knock on the head must have rattled my brain. Maybe this man was a friend of mine that I simply couldn’t remember. There was something about him...something familiar, yet just out of reach.

Then I caught my first glimpse of the majestic towers of stone in front of me and gasped. The sight awed me. A castle, a freaking *castle*, with glass windows reflecting the sunset, gardens sleeping underneath the snow. Each step brought me closer to those imposing arches and turrets, the stone gargoyles and statues of angels turning quiet and watchful eyes on all who would approach.

“Is this...my home?” I asked him, awestruck and hoping the answer was yes.

The words did something to the man holding me and he clasped me closer. “It is if you want it to be,” he said gruffly, his fingers tightening around me. “You are welcome to stay here for as long as you like, and of course I will insist you remain here until you feel your best.”

I shifted to a more comfortable position, one arm around his neck and my hand pressed against his heart as he stepped over the open threshold into the hushed interior of the castle. Where had the doors gone?

The marble floor gleamed, polished to a shine that I knew would show me my reflection if I looked. But judging from the state of the back of my head and the stain of blood on my fingers, I wasn’t sure I wanted to know what I looked like just yet.

He took a right into a cozy-looking room and settled me down on a comfortable wingback chair set next to a roaring fire. In a swift move he tore off the coat he wore and placed it around me. I nestled deeper into the fabric with a sigh.

Something in me rose in joy at the nearness of the man. At the sensation of his erratically pounding heart. “What’s wrong?” I asked him. The look he gave me was full of meaning I couldn’t decipher, but the tears still glistening in his eyes troubled me. “Something is bothering you. What is it?” I wagged a finger at him playfully. “You would tell me if something was wrong with you, wouldn’t you?” I couldn’t

have said why I was so cockily familiar with this man, this stranger.

Was I *flirting* with him?

“Yes, Miss. I would tell you if there was something wrong with me.”

I nodded. “Then the problem must be with me.”

He shook his head. “What makes you think there is anything wrong with you?” he asked, half laughing, half choking back another sob.

I moved the hand I’d touched him with to my own heart. “I can feel it. Here. Like there’s a sudden ache in my chest where there was none before. I don’t know...it’s the oddest feeling, really. I can hardly focus on the pain in my head because of the ache. I’m not hungry, and I’m not thirsty. I’m just...here. Are you *sure* we don’t know each other?”

The man shook his head again until strands of long chestnut hair almost obscured his face. “I’m sorry to tell you, my dear, that we are strangers. Although the pleasure of your company means the world to me. Let me introduce myself.” He held out a hand. “I’m Merek Lyndon. It’s a great pleasure to meet you.”

I returned the gesture, relishing the feeling of sparks that flew across my skin whenever we touched. Tilting my head to the side, I took him in. “I can’t recall you, but you *feel* so familiar to me. I hesitate to say this but perhaps we met in a dream, a long time ago. Perhaps we met there and were friends. I get the feeling you know my name.”

He smiled. “I could pluck a name from thin air and you would have no choice but to accept it. Do you remember *anything*?”

I thought for a moment, searching the empty swirling mass inside of myself. The answers were there. I felt it, like I could reach out and touch them except they flew out of my grasp.

“I remember waking up in the snow.” I offered him a hesitant smile, wishing he would come sit with me instead of prowling in front of the fireplace. “I remember you coming to rescue me.”

“Yes, it seems we have a long-standing tradition of me coming to your rescue. Though to be fair, you have also come to mine on many occasions. Your sacrifice was much greater than my own.” He shook out a foot. “I merely braved frostbite.”

“Ah!” I leaped on his mistake. “There you have it.”

“Have what?”

I clucked my tongue at him and used levity to lighten the situation that felt at once too heavy. “You said that we are strangers and yet you clearly reference a past in which we’ve crossed paths.”

The man continued to stare at me without speaking and I shrank down into his coat.

“I’m sorry. Am I not usually in a joking mood? I can’t remember.”

“It’s not that, Miss. It’s just that to see you smile after everything...it’s a rare gift.”

Without thinking, I reached out to grab his hand, bringing it closer for my inspection, and in the process bringing him closer too. I traced the lines there and smoothed my fingers over his calluses. They were good hands, I thought to myself. Strong and capable.

“I have the oddest impression I know these hands,” I murmured. “As though they have touched me before. Not like this, no. More intimately. Please correct me if I’m wrong, and I—oh no! What did I say?”

The man had tears in his eyes again, though they did nothing to hinder his inherent masculinity or the rigid, elegant way he carried himself. He squatted down beside the chair, balanced on his haunches. “Go on,” he said thickly. “Tell me

more.”

I stalled for a moment, unsure what to say, then tentatively returned my attention to his hand, to the lines there as if I were reading his palm. “Okay. Um, well, I feel like you have lived a good life. Not without its trials and tribulations, of course, because everyone has those—don’t they? I can’t remember—also there have been tears and b-bloodshed.” I grimaced slightly, then peered again at the lines on his hand. “There has also been great...love.” My voice caught and I paused at the word. “You have a caring heart.”

“I gave my heart away. It has not belonged to me for a long time,” the man said on a shaky exhale.

I couldn’t help my instant disappointment. Though what did I expect? I knew nothing of him, except that our paths had evidently crossed before. “Oh. I’m—I’m very happy for you.”

“I’m not sure if you should be happy for me or not. You see, the woman I love made a great sacrifice and I’m afraid I’ve lost her for good.”

I leaned closer at the ache I heard in his voice. The longing there for his love. “Oh no! What happened to her?”

“Well, part of me fears she has disappeared entirely. Though I hope, I pray, there is enough of her for me to hold on to. I refuse to let her go again.” The man watched me. His eyes darted across my face to gauge my reaction.

I pursed my lips. “You are absolutely positive we don’t know each other?”

And suddenly he completely broke down before me. “Oh God, Reila. I’m so sorry.”

I didn’t understand what happened. One moment I was focused on the tear trailing down his cheek and getting lost in his stubble. The next his lips were on mine and my world exploded in a shower of fireworks. I saw flashing lights behind my closed lids though my focus remained on those soft, supple lips.

Then I kissed him back.

I threw the whole of me forward—and *found* myself in the embrace. True love transformed me back into myself. And I remembered.

I pushed away from Merek with a gasp, staring at him through the rush of my return. Then smacked him on the shoulder.

“Ouch!” He pretended outrage. “What the hell! You would hit a stranger?”

“No, but I would hit a prince who waited too damn long to kiss me.” I reached out and hooked a finger under his chin, forcing him to look at me. “Merek Lyndon, if you do not know by now that true love’s kiss can break a curse, *any* curse, I am going to have to spend the rest of my days reminding you.”

He laughed then, incredulous. “Reila, is that really you?”

No more questions, and no more hesitations. With an equally loud laugh I launched myself at him. “It’s me,” I said and proved it.

EPILOGUE



Prince Merek Lyndon once thought that dreams did not come true. In fact, he'd believed it with every fiber of his being. The realization was cemented with each passing day he'd spent trapped in his beast form, feeling useless and hopeless and all kinds of *less*.

Until one day he found himself in the middle of a new dream. One in which he was no longer a man in beast form but just a man, living in a castle with an endless garden of roses and blooms spreading out all around, and his bride walking towards him.

The joy of his life. In fact, her laughter had reached him before he caught sight of her, carried on a rose-scented breeze bringing with it a hint of earth, a hint of magic.

Though the wedding planner assured them it was unorthodox, they'd chosen dawn for their wedding ceremony, as streams of orange and gold sunlight burst over the tops of the trees. To be honest, *everything* about their courtship was unorthodox. Why should the marriage ceremony be any different?

Reila, his chosen bride, expressly wanted to take his name at their home, although no one in the village would ever call the castle a "house." Still, it lightened Merek's heart that she'd chosen this spot, not even knowing what it meant to him, for their nuptials. His own parents had been married in this garden, beneath the large baroque archway topped with the royal seal.

He stood beneath the arch now, staring at the ancient stones of his childhood home, and felt something stirring inside of him. *Love*, he thought with a sense of wonder, love for his people, for his property, for the woman striding toward him on her mother's arm, with her little brother proudly following them as ring bearer.

Free.

They were free. And here, in this moment, the sins of the past were nothing but a distant memory. True, there were still politics to worry over and infrastructure to fix. Meetings to call. Plans to make. A realm to rule. But fate had a cruel sense of humor.

He'd never thought he'd see her again until he followed the call of the monsters into the woods and saw her, the beauty he'd loved from the moment their eyes met in the village square. The beauty that had awakened him as much as the ringing of a bell. He'd endured for so long in seclusion, drowning in the emptiness of his failure...until she came back to him.

He remembered her that night in the woods, fighting off the frightening creatures, her lips plump and full, the color of a blush. Red hair flew in every direction like a halo around her pale face. Terrified. He'd wondered then why she didn't use her magic on them. Expecting her to do so, he'd held off on stepping in,

merely watching...and nearly lost her again.

He would never hesitate again. It had taken him too long to realize what he wanted, who he wanted. And how to get it all for himself.

His parents were long dead, having succumbed to the debilitating shock of seeing their beloved heir to the throne turned into a hideous beast and hiding himself away from the world. Merek had very nearly thrown himself into the grave with them, and in his overwhelming sorrow he lost his kingdom, his dignity, his humanity.

Yet somehow found them all again with the help of a witch. Ironically, the same witch who had earlier cursed him to his wretched fate.

They were not as different as he'd first wanted to believe. Now, he could not imagine a day going by without her at his side.

And now that he'd taken his rightful place as sovereign, King Merek looked forward to a happy life with his chosen queen. They would grow together after this. They would do the best they could with what they were given and lead the people with honor and integrity.

His breath caught, his heartbeat reverberating in his ears as he got his first glimpse of the bride through his mother's rose bushes. Reila surely stepped straight from the pages of her favorite fairy tale. The one he knew she re-read repeatedly and kept on their nightstand.

She surpassed the beauty of the flowers, from the lush, shining waves of her hair to the spots of blushing pink on her cheeks. The courtyard, once encased in ice and snow, blossomed with the spring and Reila had made sure to leave no stone unaffected in her quest to restore the castle to its former glory. She'd insisted they have the wedding here, where there was plenty of room for the villagers and whatever dignitaries may attend.

She'd also insisted against wearing white although tradition called for it. Instead she'd chosen something in his favorite color, gold. To bring out the tints of it in her hair and to honor him.

Finally, Reila stepped up to him, handing off her bouquet of wildflowers to her mother.

"My love," Merek greeted her.

"My King."

Merek held out his hand for her to take. "Are you ready?"

His heart nearly burst, contracting painfully at the sight of her guilty smile. "I have been waiting a long time for this."

He tucked a curl behind her ear before they both turned to the officiant. Her brother Thomas suddenly nudged between them with a hint of youthful mischief.

"I'm sorry, Reila! I lost the ring," he said remorsefully. A gasp went up from the assembled guests. "But I found it again!" He held the signet ring high in triumph.

The villagers who had gathered to witness their joy let out an amused chuckle en masse. And Merek could no longer contain his happiness. He let his head tip back, his laughter full and loud. Though he cherished their moments alone when the quiet overtook the castle halls, he knew he would not trade this moment for the world.

They made it through the ceremony and the crowd erupted in a joyous cheer. And when their lips came together in a sensual touch to seal their union, Merek heard music.

The End.



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